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HUMAN ISOLATION IN CHEKHOV'S LIFE  
AND IN THE SHORT STORIES OF HIS MATURE PERIOD

BY

JURGEN FREDRICK ROPKING

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES  
IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE  
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DEPARTMENT OF SLAVONIC LANGUAGES

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UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA  
FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for acceptance, a thesis entitled "Human Isolation in Chekhov's Life and in the Short Stories of His Mature Period" submitted by Jurgen Fredrick Ropking in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.





ABSTRACT

OF

HUMAN ISOLATION IN CHEKHOV'S LIFE AND IN THE SHORT STORIES OF HIS  
MATURE PERIOD

This thesis has two objects: to show the personal isolation of Anton Pavlovich Chekhov in his own life, and to reveal that this condition of human isolation, as a theme, is also extensively contained in his short stories of the period from 1886-1903. Although it is not possible to prove that the writer's experience of loneliness and of being misunderstood prompted him to portray it in his fiction, a combined study of his life and his stories strongly suggest such a connection.

It is noted in the introductory chapter that previous investigations of Chekhov's life and works have given only little attention to the theme of isolation. Chapter I of the thesis consists of a biographical study, disclosing the almost lifelong and overwhelming isolation of the writer. His childhood and adolescent years, his life as an artist, and the roles which love, friendship, and sickness played in his life are discussed in separate sections.

In the second half of this thesis (Chapter II), twenty-five of Chekhov's stories which contain the elements of human isolation most typically and abundantly are summarized and discussed. By means of special emphasis and spotlighting these elements are made clearly visible.



The following stories are treated in Chapter II:

1886

Misery

Vanka

1887

Enemies

The Post

1888

Sleepy

1889

A Dreary Story

1892

The Wife

The Grasshopper

In Exile

Ward No. 6

1893

The Two Volodyas

1894

A Woman's Kingdom

Rothschild's Fiddle

The Teacher of Literature

At a Country House

1895

Anna on the Neck

The Murder

1896

An Artist's Story

1897

The Pecheneg

At Home

The Schoolmistress

1898

The Man in a Case

About Love

Ionych

1899

The New Villa



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## INTRODUCTION

### A. Purpose of Study and Limitations

It is generally accepted that Chekhov was one of the foremost representatives of impressionism in Russia. The traits of this school are clearly manifest in the writer's style, consisting of seemingly uncoordinated strokes of a master's brush, which blend into a fully recognizable picture only when viewed from an appropriate distance. Instead of troubling himself with naturalistic descriptions of naked reality, Chekhov selects unconnected, but significant, details, such as bits of conversation, casual thoughts and fleeting impressions to evoke his famous pastel-coloured moods.

However, impressionism influenced not only the artistic style of writers, painters, and composers, but also the whole mental climate of the day. Amongst intellectuals it became soon fashionable to see people and also the innumerable facets of life as being isolated from one another. Impressionists and their followers conceived of the world as basically incoherent and atomized. All phenomena were separate entities and could not be unified into one comprehensible whole. Man himself was seen as no more than another isolated object in this unconnected array. This condition of individuals and the lack of communication between them became a favourite theme in the writings of Maupassant, Ibsen, Hauptmann--and Chekhov.

This thesis is an attempt to show that Chekhov, besides possibly being influenced by the fashion to concern oneself with man's isolation, also personally experienced profound loneliness and isolation in his own life. It suggests itself that these experiences, as an additional





factor, prompted an even more exceptionally extensive portrayal of human isolation in his writing. An examination of twenty-five stories of Chekhov's mature period (1886-1904) will reveal the abundance of these elements of isolation contained therein.

To cover Chekhov's works in their totality would have been an impossibility within the scope of this thesis. The early stories and plays, for this reason, and also because of their relatively small content of elements of isolation, were excluded from consideration.

The present study is not intended to be an analysis of the psychological and sociological aspects of human isolation. It is quite impossible to glean a solution of the problem from reading Chekhov, since he himself, quite deliberately, never offered one. In a letter to Suvorin he professes his view:

You are correct in demanding that a writer should take an intelligent attitude towards his work, but you confuse two things: solving a problem and stating a problem accurately. Only the second is obligatory for the artist.<sup>1</sup>

## B. Organization

A general and brief exposition of the problem of human isolation, its importance in human affairs, and a review of previous investigations of it in connection with Chekhov are incorporated in the introductory chapter. The content of Chapter I will be a study of Chekhov's life from the point of view of isolation, making use of some of the numerous biographies, his correspondence, and his notebooks, while the elements

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<sup>1</sup>Letter from A. P. Chekhov to A. S. Suvorin, 27 October 1888, in Chekhov, 1946, XIV, p. 208.

(All quotations from Chekhov's correspondence contained in this thesis have been translated by the author unless otherwise stated.)





of human isolation, as reflected in his short stories of the period from 1886-1903, will be discussed in Chapter II.

### C. Definition

The problem of human isolation, its causes, symptoms, and effects have, in recent years, been studied extensively by psychologists and sociologists as well as by philosophers. As such, it has been approached from numerous angles and dealt with in its extraordinary variety of manifestations. Many different terms have been applied to it. The Josephsons, in their introduction to Man Alone, without claiming completeness of the list, mention some of them: alienation, loss of self, anxiety states, anomy, despair, depersonalization, rootlessness, apathy, social disorganization, loneliness, atomization, powerlessness, meaninglessness, isolation, pessimism, and the loss of beliefs and values.<sup>1</sup>

For the purpose of this thesis, the term "isolation" was chosen because of its most unspecific nature. It will be used throughout this thesis to describe such cases where the causative factors are external to the person isolated, as in geographical isolation or the forcible separation of an individual from his friends and relatives. It may also refer to some cases of self-imposed isolation, which may be termed auto-reclusion, but generally "isolation" will be understood as that lack of communication between people which Moustakas alludes to when he asks:

Why is it that so many individuals in modern life yearn for a fundamental relatedness to others but are unable to experience it? What is it that stands between man and man? Why is it that in face-to-face meetings man is unable to be spontaneous, truthful, direct with his fellow man? What makes so many people

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<sup>1</sup>Josephson, 1962, pp. 12-13.



today act in opposition to their own natures, to their own desires and requirements?<sup>1</sup>

And Wood asks:

What is there in us, or in the society of our time, that makes each of us a solitary individual, separate and apart, alone, yet needing others and needed by them?<sup>2</sup>

#### D. Evaluation

The importance of the problem at hand is obvious and hardly needs to be stressed. Isolation of the individual, the inability to communicate, and lack of understanding often lead to frustration, unhappiness, resignation, and friction on a personal plane. It deprives us of that genuine and mutually fruitful relationship with our fellow-man, stunts our spiritual growth, and blocks the way to self-fulfillment in ultimate companionship. The existence of these isolating barriers which prevent mutual understanding between friends, neighbours, and members of families, is paralleled also on an international level. Here, however, it has far greater and more drastic consequences, and does not stop with minor feuds, the end of a friendship or a love affair, but results directly in wars, in the mass killing of fellow beings, and in wholesale destruction. To achieve lasting peace internationally, man must evolve to such a point where he is willing and able to approach other men with an open heart, with sincerity, understanding and compassion. He must enter into a relationship with fellow human-beings, which is not merely one of tolerance, but of enthusiasm and of congeniality. But how shall the members of different countries and different races communicate and understand

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<sup>1</sup>Moustakas, 1953, pp. 24-25.

<sup>2</sup>Wood, 1953, p. 3.





one another, if this seems impossible even between people with a generally similar background: neighbours, relatives, and partners in marriage? Somehow the barriers which stand between man and man must fall.

Without attempting to diagnose this human malady, and without writing out any prescriptions, Chekhov nevertheless provided us with excellent little case histories of it. The aim of this thesis is a condensation and accentuation of Chekhov's thoughts on human isolation and his portrayals of the problem. It is hoped that this aim will, if not contribute to its cure, at least direct some attention to its significance.

#### E. Previous Treatment

Criticism of Chekhov's literary output, both in the West and in the Soviet Union, has in recent years been far from abundant. The bulk of critical publications appeared in the twenties and thirties, and only the years preceding the centenary celebration of Chekhov's birthday in 1960 saw some, albeit ~~short~~-lived, revival of interest. It appears that the presence of elements of human isolation in Chekhov's stories and plays has been felt by the majority of critics, as it is felt by any open-minded reader, but perhaps has not been given the attention which it deserves. While a great number of critics are mainly concerned with Chekhov's style and technique, those who deal with the content and the underlying themes of his stories usually stress other features, such as social criticism, boredom, futility, hopelessness, frustration, and the writer's loving sympathy for the underdog. Soviet critics, in particular, have placed heavy emphasis on Chekhov's sharply critical attitude of the social





conditions of his day, but, like Ermilov,<sup>1</sup> seem to be rather one-sided and incomplete in their assessment of Chekhov.

The existence of elements of human isolation in Chekhov's stories and plays has so far been discussed only in relatively short articles, of which the more important and relevant are by Lo Gatto,<sup>2</sup> Marko,<sup>3</sup> and O'Connor.<sup>4</sup> Anzinger<sup>5</sup> and Toumanova<sup>6</sup> have touched on the problem, however fleetingly, in their books on Chekhov. It seems all the more astonishing that the theme of isolation in his works has somehow eluded more serious and concentrated attention on the part of the critics, if Mirsky feels justified in saying:

No writer excels him in conveying the mutual unsurpassable isolation of human beings, and the impossibility of understanding each other. This idea forms the core of almost every one of his stories.<sup>7</sup>

If the presence of features of isolation in Chekhov's works has been this strongly felt by at least some critics, yet critical discussion of it has remained as meagre as pointed out earlier, than it would seem a worthwhile task indeed to round out this area of study.

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<sup>1</sup>Cf. Ermilov, V. V., A. P. Chekhov, Moscow, 1959.

<sup>2</sup>Lo Gatto, 1954, pp. 271-292.

<sup>3</sup>Marko, 1955, pp. 51-59.

<sup>4</sup>O'Connor, 1962, pp. 78-98.

<sup>5</sup>Anzinger, 1960.

<sup>6</sup>Toumanova, 1937.

<sup>7</sup>Mirsky, 1949, p. 361.



## CHAPTER I: THE ISOLATED CHEKHOV

This chapter falls into four parts. In section A some of the difficulties encountered during research will be discussed. An examination of Anton Chekhov's childhood and adolescent years in Taganrog (1860-1879) will constitute the second section (B) of this chapter. Section C is devoted to a portrayal of the isolation of Chekhov the artist, and the last section (D) is an attempt to throw some light on the role which friendship and love played in his life, and how his long sickness affected the latter.

### A. General: Difficulties in Research

It would seem strange indeed, if the man in whose writing the theme of human isolation has found such wide representation was not imprisoned in spiritual isolation himself. Surely, this theme, which permeates almost all of his stories and plays and on which they often depend for their emotional and intellectual impact, must be a reflection of thoughts predominant in Chekhov the man, the writer.

However plausible this may seem, it proves extremely difficult to substantiate by factual evidence that Chekhov led indeed an isolated existence. The absence of good biographies cannot be accepted as an explanation, for they do exist in adequate number. Chekhov's correspondence too, as well as his notebooks have been preserved almost in their entirety. The reason must rather be sought in the fact that Chekhov, save in his stories and plays, was always reluctant to bare his soul and reveal his innermost feelings. He would not do so, or only very rarely, in his 1,822 published letters, and not even in conversation





with his friends. Zamyatin points out in this connection:

Acquaintances he had many, but friends, friends whom he could let into his soul, he had none, Within him was a sort of chastity, which made him hide assiduously everything that agitated him profoundly. Hence it is so difficult to establish the time of his inner development, the biography of his spirit. Only by the way of "circumstantial evidence," taking into account little-known events of his life, listening attentively to what the characters in his works are saying, can one find out what were his beliefs and views.<sup>1</sup>

Chekhov's reserve is also confirmed by Bunin, about whom Nemirovsky says:

Bunin, one of the subtlest and most perspicacious of critics, has uttered what is no doubt the final word on Chekhov: "No one among those who were nearest to him ever knew fully what went on in the depth of his soul."<sup>2</sup>

However hard Chekhov tried to keep his feeling of loneliness locked up within himself, if the feeling was intense, then it can be expected that it leaked out occasionally against his will. Through a close study of his life, a considerable number of such leaks become indeed evident. They were no violent outcries, as this would have been against his nature, but rather complaints in a low and restrained tone.

A critical examination of Chekhov's life will also bring to light a good number of facts which contributed to his physical and spiritual isolation, but have not at all, or only hesitantly, been commented on by Chekhov himself.

## B. Childhood and Youth in Taganrog

Already in his childhood days, the young Anton was exposed to an atmosphere in which there was only meagre communication between himself

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<sup>1</sup>Zamyatin, 1965, p. 15.

<sup>2</sup>Nemirovsky, 1950, p. 89.





and other people. He was born in 1860 in the little town of Taganrog, on the Sea of Azov. It was a foresaken provincial outpost, lying outside the mainstream of Russian cultural life. Nemirovsky aptly describes this "deaf town," as they were called in Russia:

In a few years an air of dreary somnolence had fallen over the little town. It still looked attractive from a distance, with its deep blue sky, sunshine and sea, but as soon as one entered it: "What squalor, what ignorance, what emptiness!" Its silence and its mud were what struck travellers most. In autumn, and during the spring thaw, passing through Taganrog was like crossing a stream by jumping from stone to stone--whoever lost his footing landed up to his knees in a sea of mud. In summer, in the hot streets the dust no sweeper's broom had ever disturbed rolled along in slow, dense clouds. A dog nosed at a pile of refuse, the strains of a harmonica sounded in the yard, two drunkards began to fight. . . . occasionally resounded the footsteps of a passer-by. No one dreamt of repairing the roof or the door, or giving the house a fresh coat of paint. They simply made the best of things. . . . for their [the provincial towns'] peace was profound, and their ears were closed to the bustle of the outside world. They slept as did their inhabitants after a heavy meal, with blinds lowered, windows closed against the least breath of air, at peace with God and the Tsar, their minds a vacuum.<sup>1</sup>

Clearly, this stagnant atmosphere and the remoteness of geographical location would have had an isolating effect on a boy as bright and talented as the young Anton. He was out of place in Taganrog, no opportunities existed here, and it was only natural that, growing up, he soon began to look to Moscow, with its university, theatres, and gay and cultured people. Moscow was the hub of the country, the magic city which held out hopes and promises for a splendid future. Without doubt, the boy Anton, as again the later Chekhov, when his illness confined him to Yalta, his "warm Siberia," must have felt this longing for the metropolis. This reaching out over one's barrier of physical or geographical isolation was later reflected in some of Chekhov's stories and plays, such as On Official Duty and Three Sisters.

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<sup>1</sup>Nemirovsky, 1950, pp. 13-14.





To add to this physical isolation of the young Chekhov, there was, unfortunately, also a lack of understanding and spiritual communication between him and his parents. His father, of peasant stock and a small shopkeeper, ruled the household like a minor despot. Following the old Russian custom which has its roots in the 16th century Domostroy, he was the undisputed master, ordained in this position by God. If there was any lingering in carrying out his orders, or the slightest contradiction, he would fly into a rage and not hesitate to use his fists. If he was cruel, Paul Egorovich was not aware of it. He had been brought up in the same unfeeling way, with cuffs and blows, and was none the worse for it. So much had minor suffering become part and parcel of daily life, that it no longer touched him. Brutality had become a habit. Nemirovsky describes young Anton's reaction as follows:

. . . but it seemed to him that he would never forget the whippings his father so frequently inflicted on him. It was not the physical pain so much as the frightful feeling of humiliation: he was ashamed both for his father and himself. But naturally, there was nothing he could say, since he was not the only one, and his brothers had the same punishment meted out to them. He thought that all fathers must be alike.

. . . barbarity and sadness were always present, lurking in the background. They ended by making themselves felt beneath even the most innocent merriment. Anton could not be completely happy: by nature he was gay and lively, with a taste for raillery; instinctively he admired gracefulness, good humour and good manners, and everything around him was harsh and coarse. People tortured animals, lied and perjured: then with the same mouths intoned their prayers. You had to kiss the great, rough hand from which you had just received a beating because it was father's hand and because "the power of the father comes from God".<sup>1</sup>

Even much later when the father's business had failed, when he had become dependent on Anton's support and had mellowed to a considerable

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<sup>1</sup>Nemirovsky, 1950, p. 20.





extent, trust and confidence between father and son were as absent as they had always been. In 1897 Anton writes to his brother Alexander:

Today at tea, Vissarion [nickname the brothers used for their father] was holding forth, saying that ignorant people are better than educated ones. Then I came in and he stopped.<sup>1</sup>

Also, Anton Chekhov was never to forget the beatings he had received from his father, causing him long-lasting humiliation. In a letter to Suvorin written in 1894 he was to say:

In my veins there is peasant blood and you cannot astonish me with peasant virtues. Since my childhood I have believed in progress, and I could not do otherwise, as the difference between the time when I used to be thrashed and the time when I ceased to be thrashed was tremendous.<sup>2</sup>

Religion was inculcated into Anton and his four brothers with thrashings also. The old Chekhov, despite his otherwise coarse character, had one passion: the church and its music. Happy to sing the praises of God and to fulfill his duties as His servant, he formed his five boys into a choir. With utter disregard for their health, in any kind of weather they were roused out of bed in the middle of the night and marched to church to sing the matins. With constant lack of sleep and driven to exhaustion, young Anton truly learnt the fear of God. This kind of religious activity contained so little of true belief that in the end he could not believe in anything at all. Instead of beating religion into him, the father rather succeeded in beating it out of him. In this way, Anton lost his God already in his youth, which set him apart, isolated him further from the people around him.

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<sup>1</sup>Letter from A. P. Chekhov to his brother Alexander, 11 March 1897, in Chekhov, 1946, XVII, p. 41.

<sup>2</sup>Letter from A. P. Chekhov to A. S. Suvorin, 27 March 1894, in Chekhov, 1946, XVI, p. 132.

1. The first part of the document is a letter from the author to the reader.

2. The second part is a list of the author's works.

3. The third part is a list of the author's awards and honors.

4. The fourth part is a list of the author's publications.

5. The fifth part is a list of the author's addresses.

6. The sixth part is a list of the author's contacts.

7. The seventh part is a list of the author's references.

8. The eighth part is a list of the author's acknowledgments.

9. The ninth part is a list of the author's notes.

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26. The twenty-sixth part is a list of the author's acknowledgments.

27. The twenty-seventh part is a list of the author's notes.

28. The twenty-eighth part is a list of the author's appendices.



When, in my childhood, they gave me a religious education and I read and sang in the choir, everybody looking at me was touched, while I myself felt like a little convict; and now I have no religion.<sup>1</sup>

Anton's mother, a quiet and inconspicuous woman, was not treated by her husband much differently than were the children. She had only a small voice in family matters and was forever overwhelmed by her innumerable little domestic duties. No doubt she loved her children, but could not express this love in any other way but by keeping them well-clothed and fed. She was too simple and too busy to communicate with her children in a satisfactory way. Although Anton too loved his mother, lived with her, and cared for her all his life, the lack of communication seems to have persisted. We find this confirmed in a letter to Anton from his brother Alexander, written to him in Melkhovo:

Our mother fails absolutely to understand you, and will never understand you. She suffers deeply, but because you are sick and irritable. She will never be able to understand your mind. . . . Whatever it costs, you must keep your soul alive. Abandon everything. . . . There are other Melikhovos in this world. . . .<sup>2</sup>

The relationship of the boy Anton with his parents, then, was far from being a close one. Already in his childhood he had experienced a form of spiritual isolation and insecurity.

During the mid-seventies father Chekhov's business took a turn for the worse, and it was not long before, in 1876, he was forced to leave Taganrog and go to Moscow, fleeing his creditors and escaping the debtors' prison. In Moscow he rejoined his elder sons, Alexander and

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<sup>1</sup>Letter from A. P. Chekhov to A. S. Suvorin, 17 March 1892, in Chekhov, 1946, XV, p. 344.

<sup>2</sup>Letter to A. P. Chekhov from his brother Alexander, June 1893, cited in Nemirovsky, 1950, p. 131.



Nicholas, who had left the family the year before. But soon the mother, who had been left behind with four children, was evicted from her house in Taganrog. She bundled up the two younger ones, Marie and Michael, and set off for Moscow, leaving Ivan to stay with a relation and Anton to shift for himself.

Thus Anton was abandoned by his parents at the age of sixteen, without money, to face life on his own. He came to an agreement with the new owner of the house by which he gave lessons to the latter's son in exchange for room and board while he was finishing his studies at the local gymnasium. Clearly, the young Chekhov was isolated at this point to a considerable extent. But if he felt lonely during these three years in Taganrog, he did not utter any complaints. Only a soft moan can be detected at times in some of his letters: "I have had no letters from Moscow for a long time, either from my parents or from you. And the boredom is dreadful! . . . Please do write me!"<sup>1</sup> On the whole he not only fended for himself and proceeded with his studies in admirable fashion, but even wrote letters of comfort and encouragement to his family in Moscow: "Be so good as to go on comforting my mother who is physically and morally broken."<sup>2</sup> He even helped to support his family in Moscow by sending them money occasionally.<sup>3</sup> His relative happiness during these years may be explained by the fact that Anton, for the first time in his life, was able to enjoy freedom from humiliation and the petty tyranny of his father. But the price for this freedom was--

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<sup>1</sup>Letter from A. P. Chekhov to his cousin M. M. Chekhov, 4 November 1877, in Chekhov, 1946, XIII, p. 28.

<sup>2</sup>Letter from A. P. Chekhov to his cousin M. M. Chekhov, 10 May 1877, in Chekhov, 1946, XIII, p. 23.

<sup>3</sup>Vide Letter from A. P. Chekhov to his cousin M. M. Chekhov, 29 July 1877, in Chekhov, 1946, XIII, p. 26.





isolation. If the young Anton suffered we do not know. He was young and strong and did not complain.

### C. The Artist Isolated

In 1879, having successfully finished his course at the gymnasium in Taganrog, Anton Chekhov rejoined his family in Moscow and at the same time enrolled in the medical faculty of the university. The family was still in bad straits. Father Chekhov had not yet been able to secure steady work, there was no money, and nothing left to pawn. Since Alexander and Nicholas had left the parental household, Anton, now being the eldest, soon found himself the supporter and real head of the family, a role which he was to have all his life.

Alexander who, like Anton, had some literary talent, had succeeded in getting several short stories published in various illustrated papers. Why should Anton not do the same? It was not long before the first of Anton's humorous stories were accepted by such papers as Budil'nik, Zritel', Strekoza, Oskolki, and others. Antosha Chekhonte, a pseudonym he most frequently used, wrote with ease, had a lively imagination, and his stories soon met with considerable success. Although the collection of fees from sometimes half-bankrupt papers was not always easy, Anton was able to support his family in tolerable fashion and pay his own way through university.

But literary activity brought problems of a different kind. The young Chekhov wrote not because he had the inner urge to express something that he felt could not be kept inside of him any longer, but for money. Since deadlines had to be kept, his stories were often written





without care:

Until now, I have treated my literary work with extreme frivolity and carelessness. . . . I wrote . . . mechanically, half-consciously, without caring for either the reader or myself. . . . I wrote, and tried my utmost not to expend on my stories images and pictures which are dear to me and which, God knows why, I kept to myself and jealously concealed.<sup>1</sup>

Also, concessions had to be made constantly to the various tastes of the editors. Association with many of the latter he found contemptible and he suffered because he felt that he was prostituting his art and talents. In a letter to his brother Alexander in 1883 Anton confesses:

A newspaper man means at the very best a cheat, . . . I am in their company, work with them, shake their hands, and people say that from a distance I have grown to look like a cheat. I grieve and hope that sooner or later I shall isolate myself. . . . I am a newspaper man because I write much, but this is temporary. . . . I shall not die one. . . . But it is better to treat [the sick] than to take money for vile stories. . . . Let us wait and see, and meanwhile let us go in shabby coats.<sup>2</sup>

If Chekhov here expresses his desire to isolate himself because he cannot tolerate the corruption in the newspaper world, he actually admits thereby that he is spiritually isolated from it already, and only means that he must follow it up with a physical divorce. This he was able to do only in 1886 when Suvorin invited him to contribute on a regular basis to a magazine of superior quality: Novoe vremya. Here he finally found an atmosphere of good taste and integrity and the friendship which sprang up between him and Suvorin was to influence his literary development profoundly.

It appears that Chekhov in the early eighties began to take his career as a writer much more seriously than it seemed to relatives and

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<sup>1</sup>Letter from A. P. Chekhov to Grigorovich, 28 March 1886, in Chekhov, 1946, XIII, p. 192.

<sup>2</sup>Letter from A. P. Chekhov to his brother Alexander, 13 May 1883, in Chekhov, 1946, XIII, pp. 62-63.





acquaintances. His letters of that time show that he was engaged in a struggle to combine the study and practice of medicine with his activity as a writer, and also to clarify for himself his real aims in life. But his family and friends failed to recognize how much of Chekhov's heart belonged to his art, the art for which he was to give up almost entirely his career as a physician. In a letter to Grigorovich he complains:

My family and all my friends have always shown a condescending attitude towards my work as a writer and have never ceased to proffer me friendly advice not to exchange a proper profession for mere scribbling. I have hundreds of acquaintances in Moscow and among them dozens of writers, but I cannot recall a single one who has read me or seen an artist in me.<sup>1</sup>

There can be no doubt, Chekhov was still a small "newspaper man," without acclaim or recognition. Hardly anyone understood his higher artistic aspirations. And thus, in spite of the great number of relatives and friends who almost constantly surrounded him, he was still a man alone. It is most likely that the awareness of his isolation was actually increased because of the closeness of his friends and their inability to understand him. Loneliness in solitude or physical isolation can be explained and therefore more easily accepted, but to be lonely in a crowd is intolerable. How keenly Chekhov felt his isolation as an artist can be seen from a letter to Alexander:

I am writing you this as a reader with a definite taste. I am also writing for the reason that you should not feel alone in your work. Loneliness in creative activity is a hard lot. Better unfavourable criticism than none. Is it not so?<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Letter from A. P. Chekhov to Grigorovich, 28 March 1886, in Chekhov, 1946, XIII, p. 191.

<sup>2</sup>Letter from A. P. Chekhov to his brother Alexander, 10 May 1886, in Chekhov, 1946, XIII, p. 215.





And commenting to Korolenko on a letter which he had received from the old Grigorovich Chekhov said:

From this you will see that literary fame and high fees do not save you from such bourgeois prose as sickness, cold and loneliness.<sup>1</sup>

Besides his isolation as an artist, a number of other experiences after the mid-eighties caused Chekhov to look into himself more than before, to take stock of his aims and activities, and to reassess his position in life. In 1884, Chekhov had his first pulmonary bleeding which he outwardly shrugged off as not serious, but which must have worried him more than he ever admitted to anyone. His brother Nicholas was consumptive and already in the more advanced stages of the disease. Anton could see him slowly wasting away, already doomed. Having to suspect that he himself was stricken with the same illness, to which Nicholas succumbed in 1889, Chekhov was surely prompted in those years to adopt a more serious tone and attitude.

Suvorin's offer in 1886, to contribute on a regular basis to his paper Novoe vremya relieved Chekhov of the necessity of doing hack work and allowed him to develop a style which was more in accordance with his own nature, his impressions, and conception of life. Although he never entirely deserted the comic manner, his stories now became increasingly more serious and more psychologically profound. This trend is clearly a parallel to Chekhov's spiritual development during this time. This new seriousness and his preoccupation with the psychology of his characters is obvious in such stories as Misery (1886), Sleepy (1888), A Dreary

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<sup>1</sup>Letter from A. P. Chekhov to V. G. Korolenko, 9 January 1888, in Chekhov, 1946, XIV, p. 11.



Story (1888), Gusev (1890), and of course, in his play Ivanov, first produced in 1887. The main characters of these stories and the play seem to reflect, perhaps to an exaggerated degree, Chekhov's own mood during that period: they all are somehow imprisoned in an isolation of bitter hopelessness.

Only slowly did the reading public in Russia become accustomed to a more serious Chekhov: for too long they had known only the humorous Antosha Chekhonte. But in spite of this change in mood and style, Anton's fame grew, and soon he occupied an important place in the literary life of the day. In 1888 he was awarded a share of the Pushkin prize, together with Korolenko, a worthy acknowledgement of his talent and work.

However, the affection which Chekhov had inspired amongst his friends and readers was not shared by all, and some of them were now beginning to grow tired of the prolonged adoration. As so often happens, the extravagant early praise now turned into extravagant criticism and attack. Some were envious of his fame achieved so young, some considered him merely "a young writer who had been fortunate."<sup>1</sup> He was criticized for having no philosophy, for aimlessness, and for merely reporting life without interpreting it. His friendship with Suvorin, who was looked upon as a reactionary and an opportunist, also brought him hatred from many quarters. In a letter to his sister Marie in 1891, Anton Chekhov complains rather bitterly about this seemingly inexplicable estrangement from his friends and some parts of the reading public:

I am surrounded by a thick atmosphere of ill-feeling, extremely vague and to me incomprehensible. They treat me to dinners and sing trite dithyrambs to me, and at the same time are ready to

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<sup>1</sup>Viz. Nemirovsky, 1950, p. 125.







devour me. What for? The devil knows. If I shot myself today, what a great pleasure it would give to nine-tenths of my friends and admirers. Bunenin abuses me in his feuilleton, although it is not at all customary to write in a paper abuse of its own contributors. Maslov will not come to dinner to the Suvorins; Shcheglov retails all the gossip circulating about me, etc. All this is terribly stupid and wearying. They are not men, but mildew.<sup>1</sup>

This Chekhov wrote upon his return from Sakhalin, the prison colony in Eastern Siberia to which, in 1890, he had undertaken a daring journey to study the social and health conditions there. Before going to Sakhalin, however, the lack of understanding on the part of his friends had already reached such a point that Chekhov often found himself in a state of deep depression, which resulted in a marked decrease of his literary output during the years from 1888 to 1891. It is again to his best friend Suvorin that Chekhov pours out his heart:

. . . add to this also the following psychopathic condition: for the past two years and for no reason at all I have become disgusted with seeing my works in print, have grown indifferent to reviews, talks about literature, gossip, successes, failures, and high fees--in short, I have become an utter fool. There is some sort of stagnation in my soul. I explain this with the stagnation in my personal life. I am not disillusioned, not weary, not tired, but everything has just become less interesting. I must add some gunpowder to my life.<sup>2</sup>

Although the reasons for his going on the journey to Sakhalin have never been clearly stated by Chekhov, it can be assumed that it was his way of "adding gunpowder to his life." Many of his friends advised Chekhov against going to Sakhalin, to a godforsaken place which was of no use to anyone and in which nobody was interested. Although everybody failed to understand him, Chekhov was not to be dissuaded. We can only guess at what motivated him to go.

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<sup>1</sup>Letter from A. P. Chekhov to his sister Marie, 14 January 1891; in Chekhov, 1946, XV, pp. 148-149.

<sup>2</sup>Letter from A. P. Chekhov to A. S. Suvorin, 4 May 1889 in Chekhov, 1946, XIV, p. 356.



Perhaps Chekhov wanted to prove to those of his friends and critics who had been accusing him of being a man without convictions and without deeds that he was willing to act also, and to make sacrifices.

On the other hand, the writer had never quite been able to rid himself of the feeling of guilt, which the constant paternal admonitions "not to give up a proper profession for mere scribbling" had set up in him. He often felt in fact that he was neglecting medicine, especially in those times when he thought he was not producing anything of serious literary importance. With his trip to Sakhalin he now wanted to "pay off a little to my medicine, before which, as you are aware, I am a pig."<sup>1</sup>

It is possible too that Chekhov, in going to Sakhalin, tried to escape from a love affair which for unknown reasons he did not want. Early in 1880 he wrote to Lidiya Misinova as an inscription on a photograph:

To the nicest of creatures, from whom I now run away to Sakhalin, and who has scratched my nose. I warn wooers and admirers to wear thimbles on their noses.

P.S. Neither this inscription nor the exchange of photographs binds me to anything.<sup>2</sup>

Whatever the reasons were, the trip to Sakhalin proved very important for Chekhov's spiritual development. He had said earlier in a letter to Suvorin:

The journey, I believe, is one of six months continuous labor, physical and mental, and I need it, since I am a Ukrainian and already begin to feel lazy.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Letter from A. P. Chekhov to A. S. Suvorin, 9 March 1890, in Chekhov, 1946, XV, pp. 28-29.

<sup>2</sup>Inscription on a photograph on the flyleaf of his book, sent to Lidiya S. Misinova, February 1890.

<sup>3</sup>Letter from A. P. Chekhov to A. S. Suvorin, 9 March 1890, in Chekhov, 1946, XV, p. 29.







The trip in fact turned out to be a kind of a catharsis for Chekhov. Being able to see first hand the suffering and the misery of the people of Sakhalin moved his own physical and spiritual problems into new perspective, made them seem small and trivial by comparison.

In 1892, Chekhov purchased a country estate at Melikhovo, about fifty miles from Moscow. For the first time Anton was now able to provide for his family a home of their own. The estate had been bought in the winter when everything was covered with snow. With the spring thaw it appeared that the whole estate was quite neglected. But Anton and the whole family set to work with great enthusiasm to make their new abode more beautiful and comfortable.

One of the main reasons for moving away from Moscow had been to escape the bustle of city life and the many people who felt free to visit Chekhov at any time, distracting him from his work. But soon he found that even so remote a place as Melikhovo, accessible only over a mud road, proved no sanctuary. All sorts of people continued to find their way out here. Had they been real friends, in the true sense of the word, Chekhov would have been only too happy to receive them. They would have had fruitful and inspiring discussions. But as it was, most guests were either driven there by their curiosity, or they were of the kind who would "sing trite dithyrambs, and at the same time were ready to devour him." Toumanova has given us an apt description of the situation in Melikhovo:

The long evenings in Melikhovo, with drawn curtains and soft lamplight, had already ceased to create the pleasant sensation of security. He was often surrounded by people he hardly knew. Curious students, neighbours, and medical men considered it



their duty to pay him a visit and even to stay overnight. Sometimes they were so numerous that all the rooms in the house were occupied. Chekhov, despite the habitual grace of his hospitality, felt exhausted.<sup>1</sup>

In a letter to Suvorin he exclaims:

Guests, guests, guests! . . . Of course it is pleasant to be hospitable, but there are limits. I left Moscow to escape guests.<sup>2</sup>

The annoyance caused by the many visitors eventually reached such proportions that Chekhov was forced to build an extra wing onto the house in which he could hide and pursue his writing undisturbed. Most of the good stories of the "Melikhovo period" and also the Seagull were written in the fligel'.

At Melikhovo Chekhov soon engaged himself actively in public life. He was instrumental in setting up health services to fight the cholera epidemic which was rampant at the time. He built schools at his own expense and practiced medicine, treating the peasants mostly free of charge. If the life in Moscow had been too hectic for Chekhov, he now began to miss the many cultural attractions which the capital had offered. His illness--he had been coughing up blood, at times in hemorrhage proportions, and his health had declined after his trip to Sakhalin even more--and the many difficulties encountered in his association with the peasants of the district often combined to throw him into states of deep depression. It is again Suvorin to whom he cries out:

Of all the doctors I am the most unfortunate; my horses and carriage are useless; I don't know the roads; there is no money;

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<sup>1</sup>Toumanova, 1937, p. 115.

<sup>2</sup>Letter from A. P. Chekhov to A. S. Suvorin, 8 December 1892, in Chekhov, 1946, XV, p. 452.







at night I cannot see anything, I grow tired very quickly, and here is the crucial point. I can never forget that I must write, and I have a great urge to send the cholera packing and get down to writing. . . . My solitude is complete.<sup>1</sup>

After a long interval Chekhov turned again to writing plays, and on October 17th, 1896, The Seagull saw its first performance in St. Petersburg. "The play fell through with a crash. . . ." <sup>2</sup> Although the best actors and actresses had been engaged, the premiere was a terrible failure. To a large part this failure resulted from a complete misunderstanding on the part of the public of the technical intricacies and the underlying themes of the play. To make things worse, the play had been produced in only nine days and had only had two genuine rehearsals. The actors had not at all been able to catch the lyrical mood of the play, which was so essential for a good interpretation. The Seagull was produced as a benefit performance for a popular comédienne, Mlle. Levkeev. The audience consisted mainly of her admirers, people who liked a good laugh and were expecting to see a comedy, a vaudeville perhaps, a farce, or something in the vein of the humorous short stories which Antosha Chekhonte had written. Of course, they were disappointed with the Seagull-- they did not understand it. Chekhov complained:

I had no hand in assigning the parts, they did not give me any new decorations, there were only two rehearsals, the actors didn't know their parts and, as a result, there was general panic, utter dejection.<sup>3</sup>

And to Nemirovich-Danchenko he wrote:

Yes, my Seagull was a huge failure at the first performance in

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<sup>1</sup>Letter from A. P. Chekhov to A. S. Suvorin, 1 August 1892, in Chekhov, 1946, XV, p. 416.

<sup>2</sup>Letter from A. P. Chekhov to his brother Michael, 18 October 1896, in Chekhov, 1946, XVI, p. 366.

<sup>3</sup>Letter from A. P. Chekhov to Elena Shavrova, 1 November 1896; in Chekhov, 1946, XVI, p. 377.



Petersburg. The theatre breathed malice, the air was filled with hatred, and in accordance with the law of physics, I was sent flying out of Petersburg like a bomb.<sup>1</sup>

Chekhov had left the theatre without waiting to see the end of the play and, bitterly disappointed, rushed off to Melikhovo. He vowed never again to write another play, a resolve to which he, fortunately for us, did not cling. The second and third performances of the Seagull in Petersburg met with considerable success and appeared again on the stage some years later. This time it was produced by the Moscow Art Theatre and was a veritable triumph.

Another great disappointment was in store for Anton Chekhov. The Dreyfus trial in France was causing considerable agitation in all parts of Europe. While Suvorin's Novoe vremya, always reactionary, took up the case of the French government and stepped up its anti-Jewish tendencies, Chekhov, like Zola, intellectually aligned himself with Dreyfus. In a letter to Suvorin in 1898, the writer expressed his views on the case most definitely, and this gradually led to a cooling-off of the friendship between the two men which, until now, had been so unshakeable. Eventually, Chekhov ceased to write for Novoe vremya, and finally disassociated himself from Suvorin altogether.

To describe the gloomy path of his life in these years, when his illness was inexorably approaching the final stages, when disappointments beset him from all sides, and he so deeply felt the incapacity of the literary public to understand his thoughts and aims, Chekhov had already earlier found appropriate words:

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<sup>1</sup>Letter from A. P. Chekhov to Nemirovich-Danchenko, 20 November 1896; in Chekhov, 1946, XVI, p. 394.







Everyone's life is sad. When I am serious, then it seems to me that people who fear death are not logical. As far as I can understand the course of things, life consists only of horrors, worry, and mediocrity, which follow and overlap one another.<sup>1</sup>

In 1899, Chekhov's failing health forced him to sell the estate at Melikhovo and spend most of his time at Yalta, where he had arranged to have a house built to accommodate his mother, his sister, and himself. Here in Yalta, which he came to call his "warm Siberia", far away from the cultural centers of Russia, far away from his beloved theatre, he felt like a prisoner. Earlier he had said to Nemirovich-Danchenko, indicating his spiritual isolation:

You will say that we are writers and that in itself makes our life a rich one. Are you sure? We are embedded in our profession up to our ears; it has gradually isolated us from the outside world. . . .<sup>2</sup>

And now external circumstances had forced Chekhov into not only spiritual but physical isolation! To Olga Knipper he writes in 1900:

You live and work and hope, you laugh. . . . What more can you want? With me, it is different. I am uprooted from the soil, I do not live fully; I do not drink, although I like drinking. I like noise and bustle, but I hear none. In a word, I am presently in the same situation as a transplanted tree, still uncertain whether it will acclimatize itself or wither away.<sup>3</sup>

And thus, pressed into a position outside of society in his role as a writer, without any real friends, confined to an out-of-the-way place by an illness which was eating him up from the inside, often mis-

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<sup>1</sup>Letter from A. P. Chekhov to M. Kisseleva, 29 September 1886; Chekhov, 1946, XIII, p. 235.

<sup>2</sup>Letter from A. P. Chekhov to Nemirovich-Danchenko, 26 November 1896; Chekhov, 1946, XVI, p. 405.

<sup>3</sup>Letter from A. P. Chekhov to Olga Knipper, 10 February 1900; Chekhov, 1946, XVII, p. 328.



understood and misinterpreted by readers, critics and theatre directors alike, it is not surprising that Anton Chekhov felt truly cut off from humanity, and an exile in his own country.

#### D. As I Lie in the Grave Alone. . . .

Having traced the isolated existence of Chekhov as an artist who, as a result of his profession, was at the same time closely dependent and yet isolated from the literary public, it now remains to throw some light on his very private life and the role which friendship, love, and his illness played in it, and to what degree they alleviated or increased his isolation.

It has been pointed out earlier that Anton Chekhov was often generously surrounded by friends, or at least guests--people who called on him and visited him. Obviously, Chekhov enjoyed the company of his visitors, the bustle, the noise, the parties, and the animated discussions they used to have. He has stated so repeatedly. But at times they distracted him from his work to such an extent that he grew tired of them and quite desperate. He left Moscow and moved to Melikhovo with the aim of escaping his guests.<sup>1</sup> But even there they followed him and gave him no peace. Eventually, he saw himself forced to add a wing to the main house and hide himself there to work. In imagining how the guests have taken over the house and Chekhov is working alone in the relative privacy of his fligel', one cannot help but be reminded of the Three Sisters who are pushed into increasingly smaller quarters by Natasha, and finally out of the house entirely.

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<sup>1</sup>Cf. p. 22, note 2.







As Zamyatin points out,<sup>1</sup> within Chekhov "there was a sort of chastity," which made him conceal his innermost feelings--a trait which does not lend itself to forming genuine and intimate friendships. Also, accusing him of being too moderate or lacking in principles, his friends so often misunderstood and misinterpreted him. Somehow, the relationship with his acquaintances lacked the essential elements of sincerity, frankness, and open-heartedness. Chekhov refers to this phenomenon in one of his letters:

The real misfortune is not that we hate our enemies, who are few, but that we don't sufficiently love our neighbours, who are many.<sup>2</sup>

These factors, combined with the exhaustion into which he was driven by the continuous presence of his friends and visitors, inclined him to seek solitude.

In Yalta, Chekhov eventually found the solitude that he had been seeking; in fact, more than he had bargained for. His illness now compelled him to live in this virtual isolation, far away from his many friends of yesterday. Earlier he had clamoured about the obtrusiveness of his friends and the way they upset the regularity of his life:

If monasteries admitted non-religious persons, and it were not necessary to pray there, I would become a monk. I am tired of this spinning around.<sup>3</sup>

Now Chekhov has obtained this isolation, which he had been seeking, but was just as unhappy. To Mme. Alexeyev he writes:

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<sup>1</sup>Cf. p. 8, note 1.

<sup>2</sup>Letter from A. P. Chekhov to A. S. Suvorin, 18 October 1888; Chekhov, 1946, XIV, p. 199.

<sup>3</sup>Letter from A. P. Chekhov to A. S. Suvorin, 1 December 1895; Chekhov, 1946, XVI, p. 290.



What can I write about myself? Only one thing, I suppose:  
I live like a monk.<sup>1</sup>

Numerous are his outcries:

I live in loneliness, keep to a diet, cough, sometimes get  
furious, am tired of reading--such is my life.<sup>2</sup>

I lead a solitary and boring life here and it feels as though  
I had been pitched overboard.<sup>3</sup>

I am bored not in the sense of Weltschmerz, nor from any loneliness of existence as such, but merely bored without people, without music, which I love, and without women, who just don't exist in Yalta.<sup>4</sup>

In 1899, he had reproached Maxim Gorky for living a too secluded  
life:

A literary man cannot live in the provinces with impunity. . . .  
His natural habitat is always close to literary circles, living  
among those who write, and breathing literature. . . . Quarrel  
with literary people, don't recognize them, despise half of them,  
but live with them.<sup>5</sup>

And now, having fled the turmoil of literary life in Moscow, and being  
compelled by his sickness to lead an isolated existence, he experiences  
himself what he warned of before, namely that literary productivity is  
hampered by a lack of contact with people:

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<sup>1</sup>Letter from A. P. Chekhov to Mme. Alexeyev, 11 February 1903;  
Chekhov, 1946, XX, p. 43.

<sup>2</sup>Letter from A. P. Chekhov to Nemirovich-Danchenko, 23 October 1903;  
Chekhov, 1946, XX, p. 163.

<sup>3</sup>Letter from A. P. Chekhov to F. Batyushkov, 24 January 1900; Chekhov,  
1946, XVIII, p. 309.

<sup>4</sup>Letter from A. P. Chekhov to Maxim Gorky, 15 February 1900; Chekhov,  
1946, XVIII, p. 336.

<sup>5</sup>Letter from A. P. Chekhov to Maxim Gorky, 22 June 1899; Chekhov,  
1946, XVIII, p. 177.







Working in Yalta is impossible, utterly, utterly impossible. It is remote from the world, uninteresting. . . .<sup>1</sup>

The piano and I, we are the two objects in this house which exist soundlessly, not understanding for what purpose we have been placed here, if nobody plays on us.<sup>2</sup>

It was this element of vacillation between the two extremes, a house full of guests, and the solitude of an "unused piano" which marks Chekhov's relations with people more than anything else. If Anzinger points out that Chekhov "loved people and feared loneliness, but, at the same time, sought solitude as a prerequisite for his work,"<sup>3</sup> then it should be added that he not only "loved people," but needed them, to live with them and to observe them, since nearly all his stories and plays are about people and directed at the problems of human existence.

Although Chekhov needed people and often longed for their company, it seems that he was usually soon disillusioned and disappointed by them. Failing to understand him, often being obtrusive and inconsiderate, and sometimes using him for their own ends, they never gave him that spiritual comfort which could have helped him to overcome his loneliness. With disgust he would soon try to escape those whom he had longed for earlier and again seek refuge in solitude. There was no shortage of acquaintances, but close friends he had none.

It is not surprising then that the beauty of friendship is hardly ever portrayed anywhere in Chekhov's stories or plays. Reading his works, one looks in vain for such a selfless and devoted attachment between

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<sup>1</sup>Letter from A. P. Chekhov to Olga Knipper, 17 November 1901; Chekhov, 1946, XIX, p. 171.

<sup>2</sup>Letter from A. P. Chekhov to his sister Marie, 11 November 1899; Chekhov, 1946, XVIII, p. 258.

<sup>3</sup>Anzinger, 1960, p. 80.



friends as is found in Turgenev's Bazarov and Arkady. People are engaged in various forms of superficial social intercourse, but the elements of sacrifice and amicable affection, which are the basis of real friendship, are missing. At bottom, people remain strangers, imprisoned in cases à la Belikov,<sup>1</sup> and their communication is forever restricted to mere surface contact.

It can be said without hesitation that Chekhov was unlucky in establishing the comforting ties of friendship. Was he anymore successful in matters of love? Here again, one meets with great difficulties in attempting to reconstruct Chekhov's position, because he only seldom gave voice to his innermost feeling. One is compelled to piece together a picture from the few biographical facts, some snatches of his correspondence and his notebooks, and from the portrayal of love in his works.

When attempting to draw a conclusion from the latter as to Chekhov's personal attitude with regard to the value of love and marriage, or even the possibility of deep and lasting love, it becomes only too obvious how little faith he placed in it. One can search far and wide in his works without encountering even one case of harmonious, unselfish and lasting love. If love is passionate, then it is not lasting, if it is prolonged, then it sinks to the level of mediocrity, if it is unselfish, then it is not mutual--the examples are numerous. One single overwhelming impression emerges from the reading of Chekhov's volumes: love or marriage never succeed in overcoming the barriers of mutual

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<sup>1</sup>Cf. A. P. Chekhov, Chelovek v futlyare.







isolation between individuals. Although it is risky to identify the actual views and opinions of a writer with the thoughts and actions of the fictional characters in his works, in Chekhov's case we do find the frustration in matters of love from which these characters suffer confirmed in his own words. Here is one of the rare, but significant, echoes from his notebook:

Love. Either it is a remnant of something degenerating, something which once was immense, or it is a particle of what will in the future develop into something immense; but in the present, it is unsatisfying, it gives much less than one expects.<sup>1</sup>

And on another page we find these grave words:

If you are afraid of loneliness, do not marry.<sup>2</sup>

Chekhov's biographers confirm that he associated and corresponded with a good number of women. With his sharp wit, easy smile, and open and handsome face he could not help but attract them. But it seems that, for a number of reasons, he always kept a certain distance from the women of his acquaintance. He gave them all sorts of advice and encouragement, criticized them when it was necessary, but as soon as they came too close to him, he withdrew or even rebuffed them.

In an attempt to detect the reasons for his reticence, it must be considered that the young Chekhov was an extremely hard-working and ambitious man. As a medical student, writing all he could in his spare time to support his family, he, of course, had little time left to engage in amorous affairs. Also, the fact that he was living with his parents, brothers, and sisters undoubtedly caused him not to feel the

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<sup>1</sup>Josephson, Chekhov: The Personal Papers, 1948, p. 62.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 75.



lack of those domestic comforts which a young man, disassociated from his parental home, usually hopes to find in marriage.

We do not know of any tragically unhappy affairs or cases of unrequited love in Chekhov's life, which might have given rise to his scepticism and lack of faith in these matters. It is likely that he set his sights very high and as a consequence never found the love he was seeking. Unwilling to make the compromise of a mediocre relationship, he rather remained alone.

One other factor surely contributed to his reserve in his relation with women: his illness. Not only did the latter compel him at certain times to live in depressing physical isolation, but it also may have been the reason for his hesitation to form strong and lasting ties with a woman. To Lidiya Mizinova, a friend of his sister's and a frequent visitor at Melikhovo, he wrote:

Though you scare me when you say you are going to die soon, and you reproach me for throwing you over, thanks anyway. I know perfectly well you will not die and nobody threw you over. . . .

I have been tormented for a week without letup by palpitations of the heart. It is a terrible feeling. . . . Keep well, Lika, and calm and happy and content. I wish you success. You're a clever girl.<sup>1</sup>

Clearly, these are the words of a man whose conscience forbids him to merge the life of a young woman with that of an invalid, and who tries his best to assume the paternal tone of a benefactor in place of the fiery speech of a lover. A few months later we have another confession by Chekhov:

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<sup>1</sup>Letter from A. P. Chekhov to Lidiya Mizinova, 27 March 1894; Chekhov, 1946, XVI, pp. 134-135.







Evidently I am letting my health slip, just as I let you.<sup>1</sup>  
 It has been claimed<sup>2</sup> that only Lidiya was very much in love with Chekhov, but that the latter did not at all reciprocate. It seems that even if the writer did not follow through with any actions, he did keep Lidiya dangling in the belief that she was loved, as the following letter to her would indicate. It is addressed to an imaginary lover of Lidiya:

Trofim! You son of a bitch, if you don't stop showering attentions on Lika, I will put a corkscrew into you, you cheap trash, into the place that rhymes with kvas. You--you piece of dirt! Don't tell me you don't know that Lika belongs to me and that we already have two children! You pig's snout! You toadstool! Go out into the barnyard and roll in a puddle, you'll simply lose your mind from pleasure, you son of a bitch! Feed your mother and respect her, but leave the girls alone. You rat!!! signed Lika's Lover.<sup>3</sup>

But in the end, he was the one who disengaged himself just as he was to do in the case of Lidiya Avilova.

His relationship with Avilova she herself, though rather subjectively, has described in her book Chekhov in My Life.<sup>4</sup> She was already married, and not too unhappily, when she met Chekhov. According to her own admission she fell in love with him, but she continued to live with her husband and bore him two more children. Although it was clear to her that, at least in the early stages, Chekhov too was in love with her, she hesitated to leave her husband because she doubted if the latter would have given her the children and if Chekhov would have taken them.<sup>5</sup> In

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<sup>1</sup>Letter from A. P. Chekhov to Lidiya Mizinova, 18 September 1894; Chekhov, 1946, XVI, p. 166.

<sup>2</sup>Hellman, 1955, p. 89.

<sup>3</sup>Letter from A. P. Chekhov to Lidiya Mizinova, November, 1892; Chekhov, 1946, XV, p. 449.

<sup>4</sup>Avilova, 1950.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 75.



spite of the fact that she once gave him a pendant for his watch-chain on which was engraved a line reference to Chekhov's short stories reading: "If you ever want my life, come and take it," Avilova, recounting the incident in her book, says:

. . . while also leaving myself a way of retreat if that should be necessary. I could not possibly have given him all my life.<sup>1</sup>

Chekhov's feelings regarding this relationship are at least partly portrayed in his story O lyubvi. A man is a frequent guest at his friend's house, falls in love with his wife, but not wanting to destroy their family life, slides into a role in which the children of the house see him as the "good uncle." Only when his friend is transferred to another post and he must part from the woman he loves, does he realize how silly it was not to sacrifice mere conventions to what is beyond happiness or unhappiness--love. But now it is too late, and just as Alekhin in the story lets the woman slip away, never to see her again, so did Chekhov in real life in the case of Lidiya Avilova.

It was during these years of unfulfilled love that Chekhov began to seal his letters with a seal bearing the words "To the lonely the world is a desert."<sup>2</sup> Avilova conveys to us her impression of Chekhov's isolation:

No sooner had the fever of youth left him, no sooner had he passed the time of life when his breast was full of the joy of living, no sooner had he cast his eyes round him seriously and unsparingly, than he began to feel himself in a desert, lonely. At first, perhaps, this feeling was vague, but it grew more and

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<sup>1</sup>Avilova, 1950, p. 75.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 113.







more definite, more and more palpable. Why else should he have got himself such a seal?<sup>1</sup>

Chekhov's name was associated yet with other women, who were mostly actresses, such as Lidiya Yavorskaya and Vera Kommissarevskaya. But none of them succeeded in thawing out the icy shell into which the writer had withdrawn. Possibly Chekhov felt that these women were not offering him genuine love, but were merely using him for their own purposes. Perhaps it flattered their vanity to be associated with a famous writer or, like Avilova, they hoped to further their own literary career through an association with him. Others may have used him to create around themselves a nimbus of romantic mysteriousness. Nemirovsky thinks that

. . . perhaps he was a little afraid of women who surrounded him. They were cultured, charming and refined, but it was the fashion at that time to be misunderstood, discontented with oneself and with life, to desire and wait for something, to sigh and yearn. . . . Doubtless, many were sincere, but for many more, such a state of mind was a pose, and Chekhov would not take it seriously. As soon as any young woman showed signs of talking "à la Chekhov" and of playing the role of the "Seagull" in real life, the writer became reticent, ironical and curiously cold.<sup>2</sup>

It appears that none of the women in his life was ready for or capable of true sacrifice. Chekhov had asked Lidiya Avilova for two favours which, insignificant in themselves, seemed to have meant a great deal to him: both were refused. When he was hospitalized in Moscow in 1897, following a serious pulmonary hemorrhage and Avilova came to visit him, he asked her to stay over one extra day. The reasons for his plea are not known, but it is possible that he felt himself to be near death

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<sup>1</sup>Avilova, 1950, p. 113.

<sup>2</sup>Nemirovsky, 1950, p. 145.



and simply wished to see her once more. But in spite of her professed love to Chekhov, and in spite of the fact that she thought he was dying,<sup>1</sup> Lidiya did not stay, thinking that it would endanger her marriage. She admits herself:

I had refused Chekhov's warm request: ". . . for my sake." And for his sake I could not do such a little thing as stay another day in Moscow.<sup>2</sup>

Another time Chekhov begged Lidiya to attend a special performance of the Seagull with him. Since Lidiya had been a witness of the premiere in Petersburg, which had been such a fiasco, he was now particularly anxious that she should see the very successful re-staging of the play by the Moscow Art Theatre. Lidiya Avilova remembers:

But I could not accept his proposal. It was quite impossible: I would have had to take the children, their French governess, and our maid to a hotel, wire my sister in the country and my husband in Petersburg. All that was very complicated and difficult.<sup>3</sup>

Difficult it would have been--yes, but not impossible, just as it would not have been impossible later for Olga Knipper to give up her acting career and join the ailing and lonely Chekhov in Yalta. However, this kind of selfless love Chekhov was not to experience, and, for the time being, he remained withdrawn as though in a protective capsule. When reproached for this by Avilova he wrote her:

As for the rest--indifference, boredom, and the fact that talented people live and love only in the world of their imagination and fantasy--all I can say is: darkness reigns in another

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<sup>1</sup>Avilova, 1950, p. 112.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 117.

<sup>3</sup>Nemirovsky, 1950, p. 140.



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man's soul.<sup>1</sup>

It scarcely surprises, then, that Chekhov for a long time was discouraged from becoming too deeply involved with women or establishing marriage ties. In 1895, he writes:

Women take away one's youth, but not mine. . . . Silk nightgowns mean nothing to me except that they are comfortable, that is, soft to the touch. . . . debauchery does not distract me.<sup>2</sup>

It seems that his friends repeatedly attempted to persuade Chekhov to get married. Thus he replies to his brother Michael, implying that the right woman had not yet crossed his path:

As for marrying, on which you insist, well--how shall I express myself? It is only interesting to marry for love; but to marry a girl just because she is sympathetic is like buying an unnecessary article on the market merely because it is nice. In married life the most important thing is love, sexual attraction, one flesh; all the rest is wearisome and cannot be trusted, however cleverly calculated.<sup>3</sup>

To Suvorin, who was particularly insistent, he wrote in half-surrender:

Very well, I'll get married if you wish. But my conditions are: all must be just as before--that is, she must live in Moscow and I in the country and I'll make visits to her. A happiness which goes on day in day out, from one morning to the next, I cannot endure. When I hear the same thing every day, in the same tone, I get furious. . . . I promise to be an excellent husband, but give me a wife who like the moon, will not appear in my sky every day.<sup>4</sup>

Others, like Bunin, for instance, who knew Chekhov and his family situation quite intimately, had their doubts about the success of a

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<sup>1</sup>Letter from A. P. Chekhov to Lidiya Avilova, 30 August 1898; Chekhov, 1946, XVIII, p. 300.

<sup>2</sup>Letter from A. P. Chekhov to A. S. Suvorin, 21 January 1895; Chekhov, 1946, XVI, p. 208.

<sup>3</sup>Letter from A. P. Chekhov to his brother Michael, 26 October 1898; Chekhov, 1946, XVII, p. 343.

<sup>4</sup>Letter from A. P. Chekhov to A. S. Suvorin, 23 March 1895; Chekhov, 1946, XVI, p. 228.





marriage. He thought that the writer was too closely attached and accustomed to his mother and sister to make room for another person without setting up friction:

True, Olga Leonardovna was an actress, she will hardly leave the stage, but nevertheless, many things must change. There will be strained relations between sister and wife, and all this will affect the health of Anton Pavlovich who, of course, as it happens in such cases, will deeply suffer now for the one and then for the other, or for both together. And I thought: "This is really suicide! Worse than Sakhalin," but I kept silent, of course.<sup>1</sup>

In the years following, Chekhov's attitude towards marriage must have softened to a considerable extent, and Olga Knipper, the famous actress of the Moscow Art Theatre, finally lured him out of his shell of bachelorhood. In 1898, we find the first evidence that Chekhov has taken favourable notice of her:

But Irina<sup>2</sup> was best of all. If I had remained in Moscow I would have fallen in love with this Irina.<sup>3</sup>

And soon after, when Knipper was playing the role of Arkadina in the Seagull, Chekhov met her personally. An intense correspondence ensued, they became more intimately acquainted, and in May of 1901, Chekhov, who had always been so hesitant and full of doubt with regards to matrimony, married Olga, notifying his mother and sister of it only afterwards. Following a brief honeymoon they now began to live exactly as Chekhov had envisaged it six years earlier: ". . . all must be just as before-- that is, she must live in Moscow and I in the country. . . ." <sup>4</sup> In fact,

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<sup>1</sup>Golubová, 1960, p. 1534.

<sup>2</sup>Irina is the part played by Knipper in Count Alexey K. Tolstoy's Tsar Fedor Ioannovich.

<sup>3</sup>Letter from A. P. Chekhov to A. S. Suvorin, 8 October 1898; Chekhov, 1946, XVI, p. 228.

<sup>4</sup>Cf. p. 37, note 4.

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shortly after the wedding he again confirms in almost the same words his former thoughts:

I believe that this action of mine will in no way change my life or the surroundings I have always been in. . . . there will be absolutely no changes, everything will continue as it has until now. I will keep going along as I have hitherto. . . .

It looks as though my wife and I must live separately--a situation to which, incidentally, I am already accustomed.<sup>1</sup>

Olga did indeed continue to live in Moscow where, as an actress, she was well on the way towards reaching the peak of her fame, while Chekhov for reasons of his health, was almost constantly confined to the warmer climate of Yalta. Thus, they remained separated for a great deal of the time. This mode of life Chekhov seems to allude to in his story Dama s sobachkoy, written in 1899. In it we find one of the rare cases in his works where a love affair does not end in frustration or disillusionment, and this perhaps because the lovers, not unlike Chekhov and Olga, are physically separated most of the time, meeting only occasionally.

But in spite of Chekhov's former protestations that he wanted "a wife who, like the moon, does not appear in his sky every day," now that he was getting the full taste of this very situation, he found himself extremely unhappy and lonely. It seems that Chekhov would have enjoyed his wife's constant company now, especially since Yalta was so very much cut off from the milieu of the theatre and the literary life of the metropolis. Now and then he gives voice to his longing for Olga:

Solitude apparently has the most pernicious effects on the stomach. Fun aside, my darling, when shall we get together again? When shall I see you? If only you could come here for the holidays, even for one day, it would be infinitely good. However,

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<sup>1</sup>Letter from A. P. Chekhov to his sister Marie, 2 June 1901; Chekhov, 1946, XIX, pp. 95-96.



you know best.<sup>1</sup>

I am living like a monk and dream only of you. . . .<sup>2</sup>

I am waiting and waiting day and night for the time when my wife will let me come to Moscow. Devil take it, I am beginning to suspect her of being foxy with me!<sup>3</sup>

You are, of course, aware that I am married to an actress of the Art Theatre, but I am not living with my wife for she has deserted me. I have no children and live here in loneliness.<sup>4</sup>

However, despite this extreme loneliness and isolation in Yalta, Chekhov never seems to have demanded of Olga that she give up her acting career and become his constant companion. He could not bring himself to ask this sacrifice of her. He was a good deal older than she, a sick, almost dying man. Had she joined him, would she have been much more than a nurse to him? But then, Olga herself never offered to give up the theatre and be a full-time wife. Had she done so, of her own accord, Chekhov might have welcomed her decision. Although he sometimes complained about his situation ("how jolly your life is and how dreary mine"<sup>5</sup>), on the whole he was too proud to let anyone know of his suffering. On the contrary, he encouraged Olga in her career and tried to reassure her that she must not feel guilty on his account:

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<sup>1</sup>Letter from A. P. Chekhov, to Olga Knipper, 7 December 1901; Chekhov, 1946, XIX, p. 186.

<sup>2</sup>Letter from A. P. Chekhov to Olga Knipper, 2 November 1901; Chekhov, 1946, XIX, p. 157.

<sup>3</sup>Letter from A. P. Chekhov to Stanislavski, 23 November 1903; Chekhov, 1946, XX, p. 190.

<sup>4</sup>Letter from A. P. Chekhov to Mme. M. P. Alexeyev, 22 December 1902; Chekhov, 1946, XX, p. 43.

<sup>5</sup>Letter from A. P. Chekhov to Olga Knipper, 31 January 1902; Chekhov, 1946, XIX, p. 234.







If we are not together now, then neither I nor you is guilty, but the demon who implanted the bacillus into me and the love of art into you.<sup>1</sup>

Olga Knipper hardly considered that Chekhov might be too shy or too proud to ask her to live with him on a permanent basis. Her own words indicate that she did have some thoughts on this point, but also that she conveniently freed her conscience by construing the situation in her own way:

It would seem that it was very simple to solve this problem--to throw up the theatre and to be with Anton Pavlovich. I lived with this thought and struggled with it because I knew and felt how the break-up of my life would affect him and be a burden on him. He would never agree to my voluntary withdrawal from the theatre, in which he had a lively interest and which somehow linked him with life, so much loved by him. As a man with such delicate feelings he understood full-well what my leaving the stage would mean for him and for me; and surely he knew how much this vital self-determination cost me.<sup>2</sup>

Here, in the case of Chekhov and his wife we have truly a typical example of the kind of human isolation, manifesting itself in the absence of mutual understanding between people, which, as a theme, runs like a red thread through almost all of Chekhov's works and which is the focal point of this paper. Marriage here is failing sadly to break down the barriers of individual isolation. A cheerless picture rises before our inner eye: on the one side the lonely and ailing Chekhov, shut away in his "warm Siberia," too considerate, and fearing to impose on Olga by voicing the wishes of his heart; and on the other hand, the celebrated young actress, enveloped in a life of gaiety, dinners and parties in Moscow, not able to sense her husband's unvoiced need. Nemirovsky

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<sup>1</sup>Letter from A. P. Chekhov to Olga Knipper, 27 September 1900; Chekhov, 1946, XVIII, p. 399.

<sup>2</sup>Golubova, 1960, p. 685.



confirms this lack of communication between them:

They rarely spoke of the thing that kept them apart. It would have been no good. As he grew older, the writer became more and more taciturn and reserved. He did not want to complain, nor even to make his desires explicit; all words were false. No one could understand what another person felt.<sup>1</sup>

Ideal love is often thought to embody one essential feature: that the other's wishes and needs are lovingly anticipated and tacitly granted, sparing the other person the embarrassment of having to voice them. Chekhov did not have the good fortune to find such deep understanding. Hellman points out the shortcomings of the Chekhov-Knipper relationship:

I think it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the Chekhov marriage was not a good marriage. Indeed, it seems to me to have been a sad marriage. Knipper was a charming and talented young woman, but she was an ambitious woman who covered her ambition with selfrighteous talk about duty to her art. She is one . . . of a long line of ladies . . ., who haven't the slightest intention of giving up much to get it [love].

. . . they came together only occasionally like secret lovers on holiday trips. True, Chekhov urged her not to sacrifice her career to his invalid's life, but his words were laid over with loneliness and it seems that a warmer heart would have understood the isolation and the fears of a sick man.<sup>2</sup>

And Bunin too confirms the failure of this marriage by saying:

Did he have at least one great love in his life? I do not think he had.<sup>3</sup>

If Chekhov's marriage was unsatisfactory and unfulfilled, he was not to suffer long from it. In 1904, already, in the German resort town of Badenweiler, deliverance came. Concealing his pain and suffering and to the last moment cheering up the people around him with his usual kind humour, he was quietly taken away by his unrelenting illness. Chekhov

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<sup>1</sup>Nemirovsky, 1950, p. 172.

<sup>2</sup>Hellman, 1955, pp. 205-206.

<sup>3</sup>Bunin, 1951, p. 53.







had often been misunderstood in life, had never found a friend dear enough that he could open his heart to him fully, and, ironically, in death now he was still the victim of gross misunderstanding and human indifference: his body travelled home to Russia in a freight car marked "Fresh Oysters." And Nemirovsky who attended the funeral gives us the following account:

A section of the meagre crowd which had gathered at the station accidentally followed the coffin of General Keller, who was being brought back from Manchuria, and were astonished to see Chekhov buried to the strains of a military band. When at last they realized their mistake . . . I heard one of them, Vassili A. Maklakov, talking about the intelligence of dogs. . . . And a lady in a mauve dress, with a lace parasol, was trying to persuade the little old man in horn-rimmed spectacles: "Oh! He was extraordinarily nice, and so witty!"<sup>1</sup>

As throughout his life the real identity of his soul was hardly ever recognized by anyone, so, very consistently, even in death he was taken for someone who he was not. If he did not fear death and died with a smile, then it is perhaps because his lifelong isolated existence had well prepared him for the ultimate solitude of his final resting place. In retrospect, these lines from Chekhov's notebook assume a new and immensely intense meaning:

As I shall lie in the grave alone, so in fact I live alone.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Nemirovsky, 1950, p. 181.

<sup>2</sup>Josephson, Chekhov: The Personal Papers, 1948, p. 16.



## CHAPTER II: ELEMENTS OF HUMAN ISOLATION IN CHEKHOV'S SHORT STORIES (1886-1899)

In this chapter, twenty-five of Anton Chekhov's short stories will be summarized, with special attention given to the elements of human isolation contained in them. An attempt to group the stories according to the various causes of isolation and treat them within these groups proved impractical, because in many stories more than one cause seems to be responsible for the condition. The stories will, therefore, be considered simply in chronological order. For the English titles of the stories, Constance Garnett's versions have been adopted, while any passages quoted from the texts have been translated by the author.

It should be noted here that the stories selected for this study are by no means the only ones written by Chekhov in which human isolation is reflected. However, they are believed to contain the elements of isolation to such a degree that they constitute the main theme, eclipsing any other subordinate theme which also might be contained in them.

Following is a complete list of the stories in the order in which they are dealt with in Chapter II. The figures in brackets indicate the total number of stories written in the respective year. The page numbers refer to the pagination of this thesis and will be an aid in finding any story quickly.

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Vanka ..... p. 48

1887 (45)  
Enemies ..... p. 49  
The Post ..... p. 52

1888 (8)  
Sleepy ..... p. 54

1889 (2)  
A Dreary Story ..... p. 56

1892 (7)  
The Wife ..... p. 61  
The Grasshopper .... p. 65  
In Exile ..... p. 68  
Ward No. 6 ..... p. 71

1893 (2)  
The Two Volodyas ... p. 75





<u>1894</u> (7)	
A Woman's Kingdom .....	p. 78
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The Teacher of Literature .....	p. 84
At A Country House .....	p. 85

<u>1895</u> (6)	
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<u>1896</u> (2)	
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<u>1897</u> (4)	
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At Home .....	p. 96
The Schoolmistress .....	p. 99

<u>1898</u> (5)	
The Man in a Case .....	p. 103
About Love .....	p. 106
Ionych .....	p. 107

<u>1899</u> (4)	
The New Villa .....	p. 108

### Misery (1886)

"To whom shall I tell my grief?"<sup>1</sup>

More convincingly than any other, this story shows how human indifference and callousness in the face of the suffering of others and the unwillingness to lend an ear to their thoughts and worries can give rise to most desperate isolation and loneliness.

During a quiet night of softly falling snow, Iona, an old cab-driver, and his horse are waiting for a fare. His thoughts, however, are not with his present task: this week his only son, the hope of his old age, suddenly died. Why did death not come to him instead? He cannot understand it. How comforting would it be to his wounded soul if he could speak to someone--anyone, and tell him how his son died, if he could see only a spark of sympathy, a glimmer of concern in somebody's face. But there is no one! His wife has long been in her grave and nobody will listen.

But here is a fare, an officer! Perhaps he . . . ? "To Vyborg Street!" The old man hears the usual curses--he is not going fast enough.

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<sup>1</sup> Chekhov, 1946, IV, p. 135.





And partly to excuse himself,

Iona looks at his passenger and moves his lips...<sup>1</sup> Obviously, he wants to say something, but his throat emits only a rasping sound. . . . He twists his lips into a smile, strains his throat and finally succeeds in saying with a shrivelled-up voice: "My son, sir, he died this week."  
"Hm, what did he die of?"<sup>2</sup>

Iona is about to pour out his heart, yet his passenger has already shifted his thoughts and again hurries him on. The cabby looks around several times, but the officer has closed his eyes--a sign that he is not willing to listen.

Having delivered his passenger, three young men demand his services. These, too, swear at him for his absentminded driving and poke fun at his shabby clothing. But the old man is happy that they speak to him at all.

Little by little the feeling of loneliness leaves him and he finds the courage to try again:  
"My son, sir, he died this week."  
"We all die . . . ," sighs the hunchback [a passenger], coughing and wiping his lips. "Well, hurry, hurry! Gentlemen, I certainly cannot keep on going like this! Will he ever get us there?"<sup>3</sup>

Some more curses follow, and again the old man cannot lighten his heart. Finally the destination is reached, his passengers leave, and:

Again he is alone, and again silence closes in around him. The anguish which, for a short time, had subsided, appears again and bursts open his chest with increased strength. Iona's eyes, anxious and full of suffering, run across the crowds which scurry

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<sup>1</sup>Three unspaced periods at the end of a phrase or sentence indicating either a pause, emotional tension, or hesitancy, are frequently found in the original Russian text. Whenever a quotation selected contained such three unspaced periods, they have been rendered in the same way in translation. A real omission from a quotation is shown by three periods alternating with spaces.

<sup>2</sup>Chekhov, 1946, IV, p. 135.

<sup>3</sup>Chekhov, 1946, IV, p. 138.

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along both sides of the street: out of all these thousands of people, can he really not find one who would listen to him? But the crowds keep moving, noticing neither him nor his misery--a misery which seems immeasurable and knows no bounds. You could break open Iona's chest and pour out his sorrow, so that it spread, as it were, over the whole world, still no one would notice it.<sup>1</sup>

After some time Iona catches sight of a yard-keeper and, in the despair of his heart, tries to approach him. But that man, too, wants no part of him and annoyedly sends him along. Finally returning home to his own lodging place, the old man stables the horse and slowly goes into the dormitory. A young cabby, drunk, raises himself from the corner and reaches for the water bucket.

"Did you want to drink," asks Iona.

"Yea, drink, I guess?"

"Well...to your health... And you know what, brother, my son died... Did you hear? This week in the hospital... Quite a story!"<sup>2</sup>

Iona looks what effect his words are having, but he sees nothing. The young man has pulled the cover over his head and <sup>is</sup> already sleeping again. Is there really no one to lean on, even for one minute? It will soon be a week since his son's death and still he has not spoken about it with anybody. The old cabby, driven by loneliness, walks over to the stable and, stopping beside his horse, falls to thinking about oats, the hay, and the weather.

"Are you tucking in?" he asks his horse, seeing its shiny eyes.

"Go on, eat... Even if we didn't earn enough for oats, there will be hay... Yes... I am already too old to go out... My son should go, not me... He was a real cabby... If only he were alive..." The little horse munches, it listens, and its breath caresses its master's hand. And Iona takes heart and tells it everything...<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Chekhov, 1946, IV, p. 138.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 139.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 140.



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Vanka (1886)

In theme somewhat similar to Sleepy, written two years later, though with a less tragic outcome, this story, too, depicts the physical isolation of a child from its family and its exploitation by a hard-hearted master.

The nine year old orphan boy Vanka has spent his short childhood in the country and has now been apprenticed to a shoemaker in Moscow. Having lost his family and been uprooted from his familiar surroundings, he is thrown amongst strangers, into the foreign atmosphere of the city. His master and the assistants could easily befriend him and make him feel at home, but instead he gets beatings from the patron, mistreatment from the mistress, and the assistants harass him. At all hours, whenever the baby in the house cries, he must go and rock the cradle. He gets only little food and even less sleep.

And now, on the night before Christmas, while everybody in the house has gone to the evening service, the little boy is writing a letter to his grandfather. Complaining about the cruelty and the indifference of the people on whom he is dependent, he writes:

" . . . you are all I have. . . .<sup>1</sup> Dear Grandpapa, for heaven's sake take me away from here, home to the village, I cannot bear it any longer. . . . I bow low to you and will pray to God forever, take me away from here or else I shall die..."

"I will grate your tobacco for you," he continues, "and will pray to God for you, and if something should be wrong, then flog me like the gray goat. And if you really think I shall find no work, then I'll ask the bailiff, for Christ's sake, to let me clean his boots, or I'll go instead of Fedka as a herdsboy. Dear Grandpapa, I cannot bear it any longer, it will be my death. I wanted to run away to the village, but I have no boots and I fear

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<sup>1</sup> Chekhov, 1946, V, p. 259.





the frost. And when I grow big, I shall look after you and keep you from harm, and when you die I'll pray for the peace of your soul, just as I do for mamma Pelageya."<sup>1</sup>

"Come dear Grandpapa . . . and take me away from here. . . . My life is hopeless, worse than any dog's... Greetings also to Alena, to one-eyed Egor and the coachman, and let no one have my accordion. . . . Dear Grandpapa, do come."<sup>2</sup>

Then he folds the letter, seals it and writes the address: "To Grandfather in the Village." But somehow not entirely satisfied with this, he adds his grandfather's first name and patronymic. Having run to the post-box and mailed the letter, he soon falls asleep and dreams of nothing but happiness.

Can the isolation and loneliness of a child be much greater than that of Vanka? Not unlike Turgenev's Gerasim,<sup>3</sup> he has been transplanted into foreign soil--the urban atmosphere which, he feels, is permeated with evil and human indifference--and unable to grow roots, he is quickly wilting away. Like Gerasim he longs to go back to the village, which he subconsciously equates with the purity of nature and the warmth of its people. With his moving letter he reaches out for his beloved home, for his kind grandfather and his accordion, but in vain: The reality of this world is too complex for a little boy, and his letter will remain a gesture.

### Enemies (1887)

It would seem that the two main characters of this story could well have become good friends. When they meet, however, chance has

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<sup>1</sup>Chekhov, 1946, p. 261.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 262.

<sup>3</sup>Gerasim is the main character of Turgenev's story Mumu.



created such circumstances that it is impossible for them to find a way to mutual understanding. Without being able to explain their actions and their attitude to themselves, they become bitter enemies and, as such, remain isolated from each other.

Only a few minutes ago the country doctor's only son has died of diphtheria. Just as his wife, sobbing with despair, is throwing herself to the floor beside the child's bed, the bell rings. Abogin, the owner of an estate in the district, requests the doctor's services. Being in a state of violent agitation, he relates with trembling voice that while chatting with a visitor, his wife suddenly cried out and collapsed. Now she is lying like a corpse, and he thinks it must be a heart attack.

Quite understandably, the doctor refuses to go with him, pointing out that he cannot leave his wife alone in her distress, and also that he himself is not fit for anything. But since there is no other doctor in the district, Abogin has no other choice than to plead with him. He appeals to his duty as a doctor, he asks him for a brave deed--but all seems to be in vain. Only after prolonged entreaties and supplications does the landowner finally succeed in persuading the doctor to come with him. His coach is waiting outside and a pair of fast horses whisks them away.

Arriving at the estate after a wild trip, Abogin asks the doctor to wait for only a moment while he sees to his wife. He reappears a minute later, but it is not the same Abogin. ". . . his face, his hands, his body were distorted with a disgusting expression either of horror or of tormenting physical pain."<sup>1</sup> After some loud lamentations and

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<sup>1</sup>Chekhov, 1946, VI, p. 34.





fist-shaking, he cries out that he has been deceived by his wife. Her heart attack was nothing but a clever design, and now she has gone off with the visitor who must have been her lover already for some time. The doctor, still as though in a stupor, does not seem to understand and asks where the patient is. When Abogin explains, the doctor calls out with wrath:

"What is this? . . . My child is dead, my wife in misery, alone in the house... I can hardly stand on my feet, have not slept for three nights... and here I am made to play a part in some vulgar comedy... I don't ... I don't understand!"<sup>1</sup>

If Abogin had earlier shown some feeling of compassion for the doctor's misfortune, he is now entirely preoccupied with his own personal fate. In the course of the heated argument which ensues, both endeavour to prove that he himself is the unhappier of the two. Each thinks that the other is laughing at his suffering, they become more and more unreasonable, and with their insults the flame of hatred springs up.

Abogin and the doctor stood face to face, and in their rage continued to heap each other with undeserved insults. It seemed that never in their lives, even in a frenzy had they said so much that was unjust, cruel, and absurd. In both of them the selfishness of the unhappy was violently manifest. Unhappy people are selfish, evil, unjust, and less able than fools to understand each other. Unhappiness does not unite people, but separates them, and just where people should be united by common suffering there is more injustice and cruelty done than among the comparatively contented.<sup>2</sup> [Emphasis mine.]

And returning home to his grieving wife:

All the way the doctor did not think about his wife or Andrey, his dead son, but about Abogin and the people living in the house he had just left. His thoughts were unjust and inhumanly cruel.

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<sup>1</sup> Chekhov, 1946, VI, p. 35.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 37.





He condemned Abogin, his wife, Papchinsky [her lover]. . . . All the way he hated them and his heart ached with contempt. And a strong conviction about these people formulated itself in his mind.

Time will pass and the doctor's sorrow will pass, but this conviction, unjust and unworthy of the human heart, will last and remain in his mind until the very grave.<sup>1</sup>

### The Post (1887)

The plot of this story presents itself as extremely simple. A post-coach is leaving at night from a postal station in the country to take the mail to a train stop some distance away. Besides the driver and the postman, the stationmaster's nephew, a student, is going with them. The driver engages in a bit of recklessness, and during a wild ride they lose the postman together with his sabre and the student's suitcase. However, all is recovered and they proceed to the railroad station without any further incident.

It would have been rather strange if Chekhov in this story had rested content with a detailed and lyrical description of nocturnal nature and the trip in general and had not injected another, more serious theme. And, indeed, it can easily be found in the attitude of the postman and the student to each other and in their dialogue, which is a typical example of non-communication.

It becomes not immediately clear what causes the isolation of these two men from each other. Their disparity in age and education alone can hardly be held responsible, since this does not usually impede communication as drastically as it does here. One rather suspects a basic difference in their temperament and outlook on life to be the

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<sup>1</sup>Chekhov, 1946, p. 38.



cause of their dissension. The student still sees the world with eyes full of faith and hope, he is eager to observe the things around him and discuss with others what he sees. He is a searcher, and the world holds many wonders for him. The postman, by contrast, has already been disillusioned by life: the monotony of his work (for eleven years he has made this same trip every day), poverty, and constant worries. Life has dulled him, made him lose his spark. To him, the world looks gray and no longer holds any excitement.

And so when the student, from reasons of kindness, and also because he is impressed by the vastness of the night sky, begins a conversation, commenting on the weather and the position of the stars at that time of year, the postman neither stirs nor looks up to the sky.

Obviously, the constellation Orion did not interest him. He was used to seeing the stars, and they long since bored him.<sup>1</sup>

When, following their little incident during the trip, the student politely says a few accommodating words, the postman again does not answer. Repeatedly the student reaches out for some communication:

"I can imagine how many adventures you must have had in eleven years! . . . It must be dreadful to have to drive?" He spoke and waited for the postman to say something, but the latter remained in sullen silence and withdrew into his coat-collar.<sup>2</sup>

Another remark by the student finds an even less pleasant reception:

The postman made a wry and pained face.  
 "By God, how you love to talk! . . . Can't you be quiet?"  
 The student was disconcerted and during the whole trip did not trouble him anymore. . . . The cold of the morning and the gloominess of the postman little by little affected also the student who felt chilly.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Chekhov, 1946, VI, p. 265.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 267.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.





Although the student does not attempt to revive the conversation, the postman's annoyance is growing and, inwardly, he is working himself up into a rage. Finally, he cannot contain himself any longer and bursts out:

"It is not allowed to carry unauthorized persons. . . . Not permitted! And if it is not permitted, then there is no point in doing it... Yes. I suppose it's all the same to me, but I don't like it and do not want it."<sup>1</sup>

To which the student replies:

"Why then did you keep silent earlier, if you didn't like it?" The postman gave no answer and kept looking in an unfriendly way and angry.<sup>2</sup>

What is it that makes a communication between these two men impossible? The student has done no more than sit with the postman for a few hours and pass a few obliging remarks. Is it the thought of his own life having sunk into mediocrity, the thought of something which has been irretrievably lost, but which the student still possesses, that angers the postman? Chekhov himself ends the story with the question: "What infuriated him? People, poverty, or the fall nights?"<sup>3</sup>

### Sleepy (1888)

Almost an companion-story to Vanka, this little narrative again has as its main theme the cruel exploitation and the unspeakable loneliness of a child.

Thirteen year old Varka is employed as a nursemaid by a strange

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<sup>1</sup>Chekhov, 1946, VI, p. 268.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.





family. One of her tasks is to rock the baby in its cradle every night, which has thrown her into complete physical exhaustion. The endless and monotonous rocking motion inevitably causes her to drift off into a state of half-sleep, and then her subconscious mind wanders back to her former home, to her father who died and to her mother who is now a beggar-woman. Should she fall asleep and the baby start to cry, she will be beaten by the mistress.

To Varka the night seems endless, but finally morning dawns and other duties await her. There are the stoves to be lit, firewood to be fetched, and the samovar to be prepared. She must clean the master's boots, wash the floors, run to the shop. However hard the work, at least now she can move around and keep herself awake. Before the girl knows it, evening has come and guests arrive. Now, Varka makes the tea and then, for a whole hour, has to stand by the door waiting for orders.

"Run, Varka, and buy three bottles of beer!"  
 ". . . Varka, run for some vodka! Varka, where is the corkscrew?  
 Varka, clean some herrings!"<sup>1</sup>

At long last, the guests leave and the master and the mistress go to bed.

"Varka, rock the baby!" sounds the last command.<sup>2</sup>

And Varka rocks the cradle... Again, in her half-dream she is with her parents and the people she once knew.

She understands everything, she recognizes everybody, but through her drowsiness one thing only she cannot grasp: that force which is putting fetters on her hands and feet, which weighs her down and will not let her live. She looks around, seeking this force, to escape from it, but cannot find it. Finally, near exhaustion,

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<sup>1</sup> Chekhov, 1946, VII, pp. 16-17.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 17.



she once more strains every nerve . . . and recognizes the enemy which prevents her to live.

This enemy is--the baby. . . . Kill the baby, and then sleep, sleep, and sleep...

. . . . she strangles it, quickly lies down on the floor, laughing from joy that now she can sleep, and within a minute already sleeps soundly, like a corpse...<sup>1</sup>

### A Dreary Story (1889)

The gradual estrangement of a man from his family, his friends, and from society as a whole is here depicted. Having to admit that his life was a failure and that he does not understand anything, he dies in despair and utterly alone. Written shortly after his brother Nicholas' death, A Dreary Story seems to reflect Chekhov's deep depression during that time. Like the old professor and Katya in the tale, he himself was then reaching out for an all-embracing theory which would give meaning to life as a whole. Like they, Chekhov seemed unable to find it. Under the influence of Tolstoy's teaching at the time but not willing to accept it fully and already beginning to turn his back on it, the writer in his philosophical despair was very close to the position of the old professor in this story. To Suvorin he had stated a year earlier that "a reasoned life without a definite Weltanschauung is not a life, but a burden and a horror."<sup>2</sup> Though written in a severely depressed state of mind, from which Chekhov freed himself only through the enthusiastic preparations for his journey to Sakhalin one year later, A Dreary Story is often considered his most important single achievement of the eighties.

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<sup>1</sup>Chekhov, 1946, VII, p. 17.

<sup>2</sup>Letter from A. P. Chekhov to A. S. Suvorin, November, 1888; Chekhov, 1946, XIV, p. 242.





The main character in the story is an elderly professor of medicine who has seen a brilliant academic career and whose fame has spread throughout Russia and even abroad. The story is written in the form of his memoirs, and at the time of his writing the professor is sixty-two years old, in poor health, and giving himself only six months to live. Looking back upon his life, he relates to Katya, his ward:

"I have had more than I dared dream about. For thirty years I have been the favourite professor, have had excellent comrades, and have enjoyed fame and honour. I have loved, married from passionate love, have had children. In a word, when I look back, then my whole life presents itself as a beautiful composition, arranged with talent. All that remains for me now is not to spoil the finale. For that, I must die like a man. If death is really a thing to dread, I must face it as a teacher, as a man of letters, and as a citizen of a Christian country: courageously and with tranquil soul."<sup>1</sup>

In order to possess spiritual tranquility, however, he would have to be content with life in general: with his friends, his family, and his profession. This contentment the professor has lost long ago. Imperceptibly it has given way to disillusionment and confusion.

What has become of his erstwhile happy family life, the spontaneous talks, and the mutual affection? There was a time when he thought that his wife was beautiful and he loved her, but now he finds her ungainly and she exasperates him with her social pretensions and her petty concern with monetary matters. Once he loved his daughter, but now her mannerisms and the presence of her unsympathetic lover are a constant source of irritation to him.

". . . and it is not only at dinner that it becomes absolutely clear to me that the inner life of these two [his wife and

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<sup>1</sup>Chekhov, 1946, VII, p. 256.

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daughter] has long since slipped out of my cognizance. I have a feeling as though I had once lived at home with a real family, and that now I am only a dinner guest at the house of a sham wife, not a real wife, and I am looking at a Liza who is not the real Liza. A startling change has taken place in both of them; I have missed this long process by which this change was effected, and it is small wonder that I do not understand anything."<sup>1</sup>

And what has happened to that profound satisfaction which the professor once drew from his university work? It is not so much the fact that old age has slowly undermined his efficiency in the lecture room and that he feels he should relinquish his post to a younger and stronger man which disturbs his peace of mind, but the awareness that his whole academic life has been useless and wasted. Katya vehemently exclaims:

"And the university too. What is it to you? There is no sense in it, anyway. You have lectured for thirty years and where are your pupils? Are many of them renowned men of science? Count them! And to multiply these doctors who exploit ignorance and accumulate hundreds of thousands one need not be a good and talented man."<sup>2</sup>

Not only the pleasures which he once derived from his family and his work as a teacher have crumbled, but his faith in science has also been shaken. A devoted research worker all his life, the professor had always believed that science was a panacea for all problems of this world. And now he must discover to his horror that he has fallen victim to a terrible delusion and that science has failed to qualify as an all-coordinating theory; so much so that even now, in his ripe old age, he has no answers to the primordial questions of life. He frankly admits:

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<sup>1</sup>Chekhov, 1946, VII, p. 250.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 255.



"In my passion for science, in my desire to live, in this my sitting on a strange bed, and in this striving to know myself, in all the thoughts, feelings, and ideas which I form about everything, there is no common bond to connect it all into one whole. Every feeling and every thought exists apart in me, and in all my judgements on science, the theatre, literature, my pupils, and in all the pictures which my imagination draws, even the most skilfull analyst could not find what is called a general idea or the god of a living man.

And if there is not that, then there is nothing."<sup>1</sup>

His blind belief in only one aspect of life, science, has caused the professor to live in indifference to human and spiritual problems and has gradually divorced him from the very core of life. Without noticing it, he has let his family and friends slip away from him, and now he finds himself utterly alone. Too late he recognizes:

They say that philosophers and truly wise men are indifferent. It is wrong: indifference is paralysis of the soul, premature death.<sup>2</sup>

The one-sided preoccupation with science has also prevented the professor from being truly educated. Thus can Katya justly accuse him:

"You are a splendid and a rare person, but you don't know enough about art sincerely to hold it sacred. You have no feeling and no sense for art. All your life you have been hard at work and you never had time to acquire that feeling."<sup>3</sup>

Complete disillusionment is expressed when the professor draws up the balance of his life:

"Everything is disgusting; there is nothing to live for, and the sixty-two years which I have lived already must be considered as wasted."<sup>4</sup>

As his ward Katya suggests to him there still is a way to redeem himself. He would have to sever his ties with his family, as they are only a

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<sup>1</sup>Chekhov, 1946, VII, pp. 279-280.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 279.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 271.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 263.





hindrance, to him, and turn his back on teaching and science, which only prevent his full spiritual development. Although he knows that he ought to leave these sham values behind, he has not the courage to do so. They have been the substance of his long life, and he cannot reconcile himself with the thought of giving it all up.

Thus, at the end of his life, the old man finds himself in a state of severe disarrangement and hopelessness. When Katya, who has also been bitterly disillusioned by life and feels that she cannot cope with her problems any longer, beseeches him in despair to give her some counsel and guidance, he is incapable of doing so, as he is incapable of helping himself.

"Help me! Help me!" she implores me. "I cannot go on."  
 "There is nothing I can tell you, Katya," I say.  
 "Help me! . . . You are my father, my only friend. You are clever, educated, you have lived so long. You have been a teacher! Tell me, what am I to do?"  
 "Upon my word, Katya, I don't know..."<sup>1</sup>

Seeing the weakness and impotence of the professor, whom she had so much respected until now, a feeling of contempt grows in her and she leaves him forever. Now he has lost the last person dear to him, the only kindred spirit with whom he could communicate. He is irrevocably alone:

"Here I am sitting utterly alone in a strange town, on a strange bed. . . . They publish bulletins of my illness in all papers, by post come letters of sympathy from my colleagues, students, and the public, but all that does not prevent me from dying in a strange bed, in misery, in utter loneliness."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Chekhov, 1946, VII, p. 281.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 278.





The Wife (1892)

This is the first important short story of a long series in which Chekhov examines the question of love and marriage from a great variety of viewpoints. As he never placed overwhelming faith in the felicity of marriage in real life, he hardly ever depicts it in his fiction as gratifying and successful. In The Wife, two partners in marriage are portrayed who, in spite of considerable goodwill and intelligence, spend their lives in perpetual misunderstanding.

The two have separated three years ago to the extent that they now live on different floors of the same house. The wife is dependent on her engineer-husband's financial support, but this does not prevent her from spending it freely and even giving parties to which her husband is not invited. Having become estranged from his former friends as well, the engineer still longs for the company of his wife at times, but she has chosen to ignore him.

In spite of their marital difficulties, life had been going relatively smoothly for both of them, when suddenly, over the issue of a famine in the district, the old friction and hatred breaks out again. It is in their different reaction to this calamity which has befallen the peasants, that the psychology of these two people becomes visible.

The problem has been brought to the husband's-- Pavel Andreich's-- attention and he sees in it a splendid chance to gain some of that importance and recognition which he does not enjoy in his home or amongst his friends. His compassion for the starving is, therefore, not genuine. Although he very ostentatiously proclaims his great concern, he thinks



nothing of laying charges against some peasants who have stolen a small amount of grain from his barn. "At everything I first of all look from the point of view of principle,"<sup>1</sup> he justifies himself. His wife, however, sees through his pretense and accuses him that he is one of those

. . . completely indifferent people, devoid of any feeling of compassion, but who cannot pass by human suffering and intervene for fear that things will be done without them. To their vainglory nothing is sacred.<sup>2</sup>

She further criticizes him for hating the whole world, and for his pedantic and hypocritical upholding of such concepts as law, honour, and the sanctity of marriage. The wife has had a difficult time with him, and she feels that through the constant wrangling during the first years of their marriage she has become hard, coarse, and irritable.

Since there has been very little purpose in her life until now, she too throws herself eagerly into famine relief work. She soon succeeds in excluding her husband from any further participation in this work, and with great zest and enthusiasm, but little administrative ability, sets out to organize the collection of donations and the establishing of public kitchens. Although very sincere about her efforts, she shows such a lack of common sense that her much more practical-minded husband continues to offer his advice and help. His desire to assist her, however, is nothing but a pretext: in reality, he does not want to advise his wife, but he is so immeasurably lonely for her that he cannot resist his longing to speak to her, to be in her company. Not always so perspicacious, the wife mistakes her husband's motives completely and thinks

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<sup>1</sup>Chekhov, 1946, VIII, p. 16.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 17.





that all he wants to do is interfere with her work.

"... she felt my presence as a burden, and this awakened in me jealousy, anger, and the stubborn desire to hurt her."<sup>1</sup>

And as he is hurting her, he is paid back in equal coin. Husband and wife heap insult upon injury and behave in the most unreasonable manner. But Pavel Andreich does not mind this atmosphere of hostility so much, as long as he can be near his wife. So great is his loneliness:

"Who has spent a winter in the country and knows those long, boring, and silent evenings, when from boredom not even the dogs bark . . . he understands what diversion and delight the female voice in that little snug room gave me, telling me that I am a good-for-nothing."<sup>2</sup>

It is obvious that the two partners have never succeeded in getting to know each other in their more intimate traits. The wife sees in her husband only the hypocrite, the man who constantly philosophizes, mainly in order to evoke self-pity, but does not recognize his affection for her, his basic good will, and his practical ability. She does not know of his loneliness, she does not care for his needs. Conversely, Pavel Andreich has never troubled to find out about his wife's inner life. It has always sufficed him to label all her moods and actions with ill-defined clichés:

"I never knew my wife and, therefore, never knew about what and how to talk with her. Her outward appearance I knew well and esteemed for its merits, but her emotional and moral world, her mind, her outlook on life, her frequent changes of mood, her eyes full of hate, her arrogance, her good education, with which she sometimes startled me, her monastic expression of yesterday--all this has remained unknown and incomprehensible to me. . . . my psychology has not gone beyond definitions such as whimsicality, lack of seriousness, difficult character, female logic. And

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<sup>1</sup> Chekhov, 1946, VIII, p. 21.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 34.





this, for me, has been completely sufficient."<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile the domestic situation has become so intolerable that Pavel Andreich, under his wife's pressure, decides to go away to Petersburg. He is already at the station, waiting for the train, when his decision collapses at the prospect of the loneliness which is in store for him in the strange, cold city.

"At home, dissension awaits me and perhaps my wife's mockery, the cheerless upper floor, and my unrest, but at my age this is still more fitting than to travel with strange people for two days to Petersburg, where every minute I would be aware of the fact that my life is nearing its end, being of no use to anything or anybody."<sup>2</sup>

Returning to his estate, he now surrenders completely to his wife. He had earlier already become aware of the essence of his shortcomings and admitted--if only to himself--that "the whole secret does not lie in the starving, but in the fact that I am not the man I should be."<sup>3</sup> Now he goes further and declares to his wife that through his recent experience he has undergone great emotional suffering, that he has aged and become a different man, and begs her not to chase him away. He implores her that she is his only comfort, that he never for one minute stopped longing for her and only stupid pride prevented him from admitting it.

". . . make me your servant, take all my money and give it away, to whomever y ou want. I am at peace, Natalie, I am content . . . I am at peace."<sup>4</sup>

The starving peasants in the district worry him no longer. Undisturbed he continues to write his "History of the Railroads," while all around him the famine relief work, that "philanthropic orgy," is in

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<sup>1</sup>Chekhov, 1946, VIII, p. 32.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 49.



full swing, and

"... often my wife comes to see me and restlessly lets her eyes wander over my rooms, as though seeking out what could still be given away to the starving people, in order to "justify one's life." And I see that, thanks to her, soon nothing will be left of our fortune and we will be poor, but that does not worry me and I even give her a smile.

What will be further, I do not know."<sup>1</sup>

### The Grasshopper (1892)

Like The Wife, this story also deals with the failure of marriage as an effective means of overcoming individual isolation. However, the inability of the partners-in-marriage to understand each other here seems to have its roots in a more basic difference of temperament and outlook on life.

Dymov, the husband, presents himself as an extremely uncomplicated, good, and honest man, sober-minded, but rather unimaginative. As a doctor and scientist, he devotes much of his time and energy to his work, in which he has already established a reputation for himself. Although he loves his wife tenderly, the work at the hospital and his private practice do not leave him much time to cater to her emotional needs. He wants a woman, simple, devoted, and a good housekeeper who, without excessive demands for herself, can make him comfortable at home after a hard day's work. His inclination towards this kind of domesticity becomes apparent when we hear him assume an almost paternal tone with his wife; with her twenty-two years she is ten years younger than her husband, but he calls her "Mama." His wife values in him the willingness to sacrifice,

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<sup>1</sup>Chekhov, 1946, VIII, p. 50.





his sincere compassion, and she declares that there is something strong, mighty and bear-like in him.<sup>1</sup> He is so simple and trusting, almost to the point of gullibility, that Olga Ivanovna complains of him to her friends: "This man is getting me down with his magnanimity!"<sup>2</sup>

If Dymov's outlook on life can be called sober and rational, that of his wife is the extreme opposite. This can hardly be explained by the fact that she is considerably younger than her husband, but must be sought in a fundamental difference of character. In contrast to Dymov, Olga Ivanovna lacks stability and practicality. She is an overly romantic, adventurous, and flighty woman. Having fallen in with a group of artists, she tries with all her might to be one of them, in spite of her only mediocre talents. Flattery on the part of her Bohemian friends, on whose eccentric life she is modelling her own, has led her to believe that artistic fame awaits her in the future.

Whenever Olga Ivanovna gives a party for her artist friends, her husband removes himself to another room. But punctually at eleven-thirty he opens the doors to the dining room and ceremoniously beckons the guests for supper. Affectionately--so she thinks--his wife calls him "my dear maître d'hôtel" and exclaims in a flush of curious pride:

"You are simply wonderful! Ladies and gentlemen, look at his forehead! Dymov, show your profile. Ladies and gentlemen, look: the face of a Bengal tiger, and an expression so good and kind like a deer's. Oh, darling!"<sup>3</sup>

In spite of the ostensible solidity of their marriage, the lack of common interests and the failure to participate in the activities of the

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<sup>1</sup>Chekhov, 1946, VIII, p. 53.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 68.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 56.

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other is so pronounced that it slowly causes the two partners to drift apart. Dymov not only does not share his wife's more or less genuine enthusiasm for the arts, but almost spurns music and painting as trivial and a waste of time. Admittedly, he does not understand it. And, conversely, Olga Ivanovna has not the faintest idea about the medical work to which her husband is devoting his life. When the latter tells her one day that he has just defended his dissertation and that there is a good chance he might get a lectureship in general pathology, she does not even turn around to face him. Instead of being overjoyed at the good news, she continues to fix her hair with her back to him.

. . . she did not understand what lectureship and general pathology meant, and, besides, she feared to be late for the theatre and did not say anything.<sup>1</sup>

Noting that the partners are thus withdrawing into separate spheres and that communication between them is breaking down in earnest, we are not surprised to see Olga Ivanovna eventually deceive her husband with one of her artist friends. Very conveniently, she eases her conscience by telling herself that such a common and simple man as Dymov has already received enough happiness from her and that, as far as she is concerned, one must experience everything in life. While engaged in her love affair, she does not hesitate to exploit the goodheartedness of her already suspecting, but indulgent husband in the most shameless fashion.

Her amorous adventure is too feverish, however, not to give way to some regret in Olga. Soon she finds herself longing for "the physical peace and purity" which she has known with her husband, yet she cannot break with her lover altogether. Only when her husband contracts

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<sup>1</sup>Chekhov, 1946, VIII, p. 68.



diphtheria in the course of his research work at the hospital and is dying does she realize how worthy and noble a man he is, and whom not only she, but also the world of science is about to lose. Now Olga Ivanovna sees that he is head and shoulders above all other men of her acquaintance, now she is repentant of her past errands and would love him, start a new, a better life with him, if he would only live. But all is too late. Dymov dies with his familiar kind smile on his lips.

Here the story ends, and we are left with the question whether to believe or disbelieve in the sincerity of Olga's repentance. Is it possible to have faith in her if she can let her husband die without going into his room because she fears infection, thus depriving him of the pleasure of a few last words of comfort?

### In Exile (1892)

Siberia was colonized mainly by people who were sent there as punishment for either political or criminal offences. Often it was a life sentence, and they were never to see their friends and relatives again. While some exiles adjusted more or less easily to the hardships and isolation, for many it meant a lifetime of suffering. The reaction of the exiles to the problem of loneliness encountered in banishment--either a tortured acceptance à la Tolstoy or a futile rebellion against it--is the subject of this story; and once again, Chekhov could not refrain from demonstrating his deep doubt in the comforting qualities of love.





The story relates the conversation of two men in exile: Simeon, a ferryman, who has already been there for twenty-two years and is quite resigned to his fate, and a young Tartar who has only recently been sentenced. It is Simeon's belief that he enjoys much more freedom in Siberia, far away from the corruption and social pressures of the homeland: "I want nothing. God grant everybody such a life."<sup>1</sup>

The Tartar, however, is suffering from extreme loneliness and hopes that his mother and young wife will follow him into exile when his already sick father dies. But Simeon warns him:

"Don't listen to the Evil one. Don't give in to him. He tells you about women, but you answer to spite him: I don't want them! He tells you about freedom, but you stick to it and say: I don't want it. I don't need anything. No father, no mother, no wife, no freedom, no home, no love! I don't need anything! Plague take them all!"<sup>2</sup>

To strengthen his case, Simeon then relates the story of a certain nobleman who was exiled to Siberia for some reason. Arriving there, he at first wanted to regenerate himself spiritually and lead a life of hard work, close to the soil. Yet soon loneliness tempted him to persuade his beautiful young wife and their little daughter to come out and join him. She took pity and came. Because he loved his wife and because she was delicate and sophisticated, he tried to give her all possible comforts. He took up a social life, bought all sorts of luxuries, overspent himself and, in the end, still could not keep her:

"Milady did not stay with him very long. How could she? The mud, the water, the cold, no vegetables, no fruit, surrounded by uneducated people and drunkards with no manners, and she a pampered young lady from the capital... Of course, she got bored."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Chekhov, 1946, VIII, p. 80.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 82.

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Then one day she was off to Russia with a handsome government official.

For eight years thereafter the nobleman tirelessly sent applications to the government, in an attempt to get a pardon. He sold his land and mortgaged his house to pay for the required bribes and application fees, but all was in vain. Freedom was not granted to him. Now he had only one single consolation left: his pretty little daughter. He doted on her, worshipped her. But there was no life for her in Siberia. She began to pine and wither away, she contracted consumption and became bedridden.

"He spent a terrific amount on doctors, which I think would have been better spent on drink...

She'll die, anyway, there is no help. And then it was all up with him: he would hang himself or try to escape to Russia--the same old thing. He would escape and they would catch him, and then the trial, hard labour and flogging..."<sup>1</sup>

However convincing Simeon's story is, it does not help the Tartar to reconcile himself with the prospect of the lonely life of the outcast. Groping for Russian words, he mutters:

"Good, good. . . . Wife and daughter. What is hard labour and suffering? He saw his wife and daughter... You say one should want nothing. But nothing is evil! His wife spent three years with him, God granted him that. Nothing is evil, but three years--that is good. How is it you don't understand this? . . . Better one day of happiness than nothing."<sup>2</sup>

And rebelling against Simeon's stoic acceptance of his fate, the Tartar continues his attack:

"God made man that he be alive, that he should know happiness, grief, and suffering, but you want nothing, so you are not alive, but a stone! A stone wants nothing and so do you..."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Chekhov, 1946, VIII, p. 83.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 87.



With the fall of night their conversation comes to an end. As Simeon, the Tartar, and the other ferrymen lie down in their damp little hut, voices are heard:

"And I am content," muttered Simeon as he fell asleep. "God grant everybody such a life. . . ."  
 "What is that? Who is there?"  
 "It's the Tartar crying."  
 "Oh, he is a queer fish."  
 "He'll get used to it."I

### Ward No. 6 (1892)

Together with Peasants, written in 1897, this story is often considered Chekhov's most successful prose work of the nineties. Amongst the intellectuals in Russia and Chekhov's critics Ward No. 6 has lent itself to a number of attractive interpretations. It has been seen as an exposure of the often disgusting conditions in Russian provincial hospitals, as an attack on the Tolstoyan theory of non-resistance to evil, and as an acrid criticism of the Tsarist rule, implying that the whole of Russia was one big ward with the secret police displaying as much small-minded brutality as the warder Nikita. However, while all these interpretations have their own merits, another important facet of Ward No. 6, namely the gradual estrangement of Dr. Ragin and his ending in complete isolation, seems to have been overlooked. It is this aspect which will be examined following the resumé of the story below.

A small, unbelievably squalid hospital in a provincial town serves as the setting. When Dr. Ragin takes charge of it, he finds the general conditions in it absolutely criminal. The doctor is a decent, intelligent

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<sup>1</sup>Chekhov, 1946, VIII, p. 87.





man and wishes sincerely to effect improvements. But he does not have the strength of character necessary to cope with the harsh reality of his environment and before long is overwhelmed by the never-ending corruption. He soon gives up all attempts to rectify conditions in the hospital and restricts his work to the occasional perfunctory examination of the patients, while spending most of his time in his room reading or meditating with the aid of vodka and pickles.

In the zoo-like Ward No. 6 of the hospital, five lunatics are imprisoned behind iron bars and left entirely to the supervision of their warder Nikita, a retired soldier who restricts the discharge of his duties mainly to beating his patients. One of these patients is Gromov who suffers from a persecution complex, but in his brighter moments expounds philosophical and social ideas with great intelligence and fervour. One day when Dr. Ragin for the first time visits this ward, he becomes involved in a heated argument with Gromov. The latter complains bitterly about the injustice which he sees in his imprisonment in an asylum, while Dr. Ragin tries to console him with Tolstoyan thoughts. He tells him that his confinement is not a matter of logic, but of pure chance. Prisons and asylums exist and somebody must occupy them. And besides:

"There is no difference between a warm, comfortable study and this ward. . . . The rest and tranquillity of a man are within him, not outside of him. . . . The wise man, the man of thought and penetration is distinguished by his contempt for suffering; he is always content and surprised by nothing."<sup>1</sup>

Dr. Ragin enjoys the discussion with Gromov so much that he takes to visiting him regularly. Soon, these visits are the talk of the

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<sup>1</sup>Chekhov, 1946, VIII, p. 135.





hospital and, inevitably, come to the attention of the town administration. On the pretext of discussing some business matter, he is asked to come to the mayor's office where, as he realizes only afterwards, a commission is covertly testing his mental sanity. When asked about Gromov, the doctor declares that he is insane, but a most interesting young man. Soon after he is asked to resign from his post. Everybody now thinks that he is ill and should undergo some sort of treatment. Even his only friend, the town's postmaster, urges him to do something about his "complaint," which annoys Ragin so much that he falls out with him.

In the end, his former assistant, who has been placed in charge of the hospital, tricks him into visiting the lunatic ward for the first time since his resignation. The door is thrown shut behind him and Dr. Ragin is a patient himself. Now he is forced to face the filth, the cockroaches, the stench of fish and sour cabbage, and the cruelty of Nikita, all of which he had always chosen to overlook. Not surprisingly his fine philosophy, so ardently proclaimed in his conversations with Gromov, fails to be an effective defence against this stark reality. When he protests in utter despair, he is savagely beaten by Nikita and a short time later dies of an apoplectic stroke.

It becomes clear from reading the story that the description of the terrible conditions in the hospital and Dr. Ragin's attitude of resignation as opposed to Gromov's burning desire to live and act clearly are placed in the foreground of the action and, in sheer volume, dominate it. Volume, however, cannot be regarded as the only and exclusive measurement to be applied in assessing the themes contained in a text.



Certainly, intensity can compensate for smallness of volume and must not be overlooked. As a magician will distract the attention of the audience from the real action with some ostentatious manipulations, so has Chekhov here placed the external emphasis on the afore-mentioned themes, thereby almost concealing another important theme--that of human isolation.

During his long years in this provincial town, Dr. Ragin has always been alone, as he had confirmed earlier in one of his talks with Gromov:

"What is there? The town is tiresome to the point of torment. There is no one to talk to, no one to listen to. . . ."1

His only companion had been the postmaster, but neither with him was he really able to communicate, and at one point he complains:

". . . he is good and generous and a merry fellow, but tiresome. There are people who always say only clever things, yet you cannot help but feel that, at bottom, they are stupid."2

And as it turns out later, the postmaster is, indeed, incapable of understanding his friend's emotional state, as are all the other more distant persons of Ragin's acquaintance.

It can hardly be disputed that Dr. Ragin's imprisonment and death in the lunatics' ward are the climax of the story. It is further obvious that this climax--the imprisonment--has been brought about by the doctor's progressive estrangement from his environment, by the isolation which unrelentingly had closed in around him:

"It is all a delusion. My illness lies merely in this, that in twenty years I found in this town only one intelligent man, and he was a lunatic. There is no illness, I have simply fallen into a magic circle from which there is no escape."3

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<sup>1</sup>Chekhov, 1946, VIII, p. 133.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 146.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 153.





If isolation has produced the climax in Ward No. 6, as it has been established, then it is beyond controversy that isolation constitutes an important element in this story.

### The Two Volodyas (1892)

The isolation of young upper-class women in the provinces and their resultant inability to find for themselves a purpose in life is the main theme underlying this short narrative. Condemned to a life of inactivity, boredom, and emptiness, a young girl is tempted to take steps she can only regret. Desperate, and with no outlet for her youthful enthusiasm and passion, she becomes an easy prey to the caprices of an unfeeling and callous man.

Sophia, an intelligent and sensitive young girl of twenty-three, living in the provinces, has, as long as she can remember, been in love with Volodya, a childhood companion. He, however, has never shown any sign of noticing, let alone returning her affection. Partly to hurt Volodya, partly from loneliness and boredom, and partly because she fears to become an old maid, she has married Colonel Yagich two months ago, a man twice her age, her father's and also Volodya's friend.

The wedding bells have hardly stopped ringing, but Sophia already realizes that she has deceived herself, and regrets her mistake. She never will be able to love her husband and dreads the thought that for a whole lifetime she will have to suffer the nearness of a man whom she does not love. At the same time, she will have to smother constantly her feelings for a younger, fascinating, and, as it seems to her, unusual man--Volodya.





The only likeable feature she can now detect in her uninteresting husband is the fact that his name too is Volodya.

Thus disillusioned and desperate from the lack of purpose in her life, Sophia's thoughts wander to her cousin Olga who, following some bitter experiences, found refuge in a monastery and now seems to be quite happy there. But is there no other way? "To bury oneself alive, does that really solve the questions of life? This is death, not life."<sup>1</sup> However, another avenue--and seemingly the only one which might lead her away from ennui and loneliness--soon opens up before her: ironically, since her marriage Volodya has begun to pay court to her and now, in the absence of her husband, comes to visit her. He is a cold and calculating man, and no doubt has sensed her unhappiness and frustration. Besides, it is much more convenient to have a little affair with a safely married woman than to woo a girl who is desperate for marriage.

Sophia has been longing to see Volodya, to communicate, to interchange thoughts with him, and trustingly she now confides her intimate problems to him.

"I find life difficult. . . . Do teach me. . . . Tell me something convincing. Even if it is only one word."<sup>2</sup>

Volodya, however, has not come to comfort her spiritually, but has been lured by the prospect of an easy conquest. He is not willing and, perhaps, not able to extend warm sympathy to a fellow-being. In an almost diabolical manner he spits into the heart which has trustfully opened up to him:

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<sup>1</sup>Chekhov, 1946, VIII, p. 259.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

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"Only one word? Alright: tararabumbia."<sup>1</sup>

In response to this remark, Sophia begs him to speak with her like an educated man to a mature and serious woman, about the arts, for instance, to which he retorts:

"What do you suddenly want with the arts? Do you want a constitution or sturgeon with horseradish?"<sup>2</sup>

When Sophia continues to speak about the problems which give her no peace, Volodya says:

"Now enough, enough. . . . let's leave it to the Schopenhauers to philosophize and prove everything as they please, but, in the meantime, let's kiss these little hands."<sup>3</sup>

Regardless of the humiliation Sophia is suffering at the hands of Volodya, she surrenders to him and becomes his mistress. While she is on her knees, begging him for another rendezvous, he tells her bluntly that she looks like a little dog, waiting for a piece of ham. Then he puts her on his lap and, while rocking her like a child, begins to sing: "Tara...rabumdia ... Tara...rabumdia!"

After a week, Volodya throws her over and

. . . thereafter, life went on as before, just as uninteresting, dreary, and sometimes even agonizing. The Colonel and Volodya play billiards and piquet for long hours. . . .<sup>4</sup>

As for Sophia and

. . . the girls and women of her circle there is no choice but perpetually to ride in troikas, to tell lies, or to go into a monastery, to kill one's flesh...<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Chekhov, 1946, VIII, p. 259.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 260.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 261.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.





A Woman's Kingdom (1894)

Although the Industrial Revolution reached Russia with some delay, its development there had been sufficiently swift to have created, at Chekhov's time, a class of workers divorced from the soil and living in sordid poverty. As later in Three Years (1895) and A Doctor's Visit (1898), Chekhov illustrates also in A Woman's Kingdom the problems associated with the rise of capitalism. One would expect that the writer would have chosen to concentrate his attention on the suffering of the workers. However, though their fate is treated to some extent, it only serves as a background against which the isolation and the general psychology of the owners are portrayed. It seems that their problems were often as many as those of the workers though of a different nature. Many of the owners, too, were unwilling cogs in the industrial machine, capitalists by inheritance rather than by inclination and often reaping more unhappiness than pleasure from their wealth.

Anna Akimovna, the heroine of this story, is one of these people. Herself of peasant stock, she grew up in simple, almost poor, but humanly-warm surroundings. Now, that she has inherited a large factory from her late uncle, she finds herself uprooted from her native environment just as much as her workers. Her position compells her to devote most of her time to the management of the factory, leaving her without the pleasure of many other, more feminine, activities. A simple, straight person, Anna Akimovna sincerely dislikes all the trappings which seem to be such an ineradicable part of her ownership: the hypocrisy, the condescending charity, the dishonesty, and a lack of principles. She





suffers all the more because in her childhood she has known the uncorrupted and uncomplicated life of the working man.

As it were, Anna Akimovna stands with one foot in the working-class and with the other in the upper middle-class, unable to find her proper place in either. Although she feels an aversion to the false values of her present milieu, she has been spoilt by its affluence and the comforts it offers; although she nostalgically longs for the warmth of her parental home, she can no longer abide the poverty and the lack of refinement associated with it. Thus, she is violently torn between two opposite modes of life and truly without a spiritual home.

It is not surprising then, that Anna Akimovna is a very lonely woman. Those people belonging to the working-class fear her and keep their distance because she has risen above them, and the old-established members of the upper middle-class look down upon her for reasons of her humble birth. Chekhov describes her emotional state thus:

She began to be vexed by loneliness and the persistent thought that her beauty, her health, and her wealth were only a delusion since she was not needed in this world, was of no use to anyone, and nobody loved her. . . .<sup>1</sup>

She thought that her loneliness was entirely natural, since she had never married and never would marry. But that was not her fault. Fate itself had flung her out of the simple working-class surroundings in which, if she could rely on her memory, she had felt so snug and at home into these enormous rooms where she could never think what to do with herself and could not understand why so many people kept passing before her eyes. What was happening now seemed to her trivial, fruitless, since it did not and could not give her happiness for one minute.<sup>2</sup>

And as for the lack of love in her life, Anna Akimovna exclaims:

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<sup>1</sup>Chekhov, 1946, VIII, p. 313.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 315.



"I am lonely, lonely as the moon in the sky, and a waning moon at that; and whatever you may say, I feel that this waning can only be overcome by love in its ordinary sense. It seems to me that such love would define my duties, my work, and clarify my conception of life."<sup>1</sup>

In Pimenov, a foreman in her factory, Anna has met a man whom she respects and of whom she is fond. She is attracted by his strength, his honesty, and his kindness. He could mean the end of her loneliness. But although Pimenov too seems to like her, as a working man he is too timid to approach his mistress as a suitor. On Christmas Day, when the subject of matrimony comes up for discussion amongst the women in Anna Akimovna's house, she calls out daringly:

"Very good, make a match for me with Pimenov. . . . On my honour, I will marry him."<sup>2</sup>

But the feeling of happiness which spread through Anna as a result of this decision is short-lived. All too soon it is shattered by her footman's remark:

"I was downstairs and heard you were joking concerning Pimenov," he said, putting his hand before his mouth to stifle his laughing. "If he were to sit down to dinner today with Victor Nikolaevich and the General, he'd die of fright." Mishenka's shoulders were shaking with laughter. "I bet, he doesn't even know how to hold his fork."<sup>3</sup>

This remark by her footman causes Anna Akimovna to realize in the most convincing fashion that her earlier decision to marry Pimenov was nothing but a whim and utter nonsense. Suddenly now she feels repulsion at the thought of his pitiful figure, his naive character, and his timid and awkward manner. She hastens to assure the people in her

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<sup>1</sup>Chekhov, 1946, VIII, p. 319.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 331.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 332.





house that she had only been joking when she spoke of marriage to Pimenov. No, the rift between them is too wide. How could she even think of marrying him!

She lay down with her clothes on and sobbed with shame and dejection. What seemed most vexatious and stupid of all to her was that her dreams that day about Pimenov had been right, lofty, and honourable. But at the same time she felt that Lysevich and even Krylin [a shameless lawyer and a dull Civil Councillor] were nearer to her than Pimenov and all the workpeople taken together. . . . she thought too that it was already too late for her to dream of happiness, that everything was over for her, and that to go back to the life when she had slept under the same quilt with her mother, or to devise some new unusual way of life, was impossible.<sup>1</sup>

#### Rothschild's Fiddle (1894)

A man's extremely narrow and warped outlook and his complete lack of any good-will or fellow feeling result here in a state of isolation which affects not only his own existence and that of his wife, but also extends itself into the relations with all other people.

Yakov Ivanov is a coffin-maker in a small town. Business is bad, making it necessary for him to supplement his meagre income by playing the fiddle in a local band. The main concern in life for the extremely limited coffin-maker are the small financial losses which he seems to suffer continuously. People who move away to another town only to die there are one loss. Children's coffins, because of the smallness of the order, another. On holidays he cannot work--yet another loss. Yakov's petty preoccupation with the workings of his small business is so great that, as it appears, he has never in his life established an intimate

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<sup>1</sup> Chekhov, 1946, VIII, pp. 333-334.





relationship with anyone, not even with his wife Martha. God only knows how he got married to her, for he has never looked upon her as a human being.

Now that she is dying with her face red from fever, but unusually clear and joyful, he feels confused: he is so accustomed to seeing her pale and unhappy looking.

It seemed as if she were indeed dying, and were happy in the knowledge that finally she was leaving forever the cabin, the coffins, and Yakov...

Looking at his old wife, Yakov somehow remembered that, as it were, all his life he had not once treated her kindly or caressed her, never pitied her, never thought of buying her a kerchief or bringing her a sweet tidbit from a wedding. He had only screamed at her, abused her and threatened her with his fists. True, he had never really beaten her, but still put her into a fright, and each time she would be frozen to the ground with terror. Yes, and he had forbidden her to drink tea, as the losses even without that were great enough, and so she drank only hot water. And he understood why she had such a strange, happy face now, and he became terrified.<sup>1</sup>

During her last hours Martha's thoughts wander back into the past. She tells her husband about the only child they have had. It was fifty years ago, but the little girl had soon died. She recalls how a long time ago they used to sit under a willow tree by the stream and sing.

Yakov digs frantically into his memory, but he simply cannot remember either the little child or the willow tree.<sup>2</sup>

In any case, he is so little accustomed to dwelling on such subtle things as feelings and reminiscences that he becomes embarrassed and, leaving his dying wife, goes off to make the coffin for her. When he has finished it, he does not forget to enter it conscientiously in his books as a debt of two rubles and forty kopeks against Martha Ivanovna.

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<sup>1</sup>Chekhov, 1946, VIII, p. 337.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 339.



Now Martha is dead. Yakov has lost the humble and loyal companion of his life, but at the funeral no other thought enters his sluggish mind than the coffin. Tapping it, he thinks: "A good piece of work!"<sup>1</sup> And on the way home from the graveyard, Yakov himself feels unwell and realizes that his own hour has come, prompting him to think again of his wife:

The fifty years they had spent under one roof stretched back to eternity, yet in the whole of that eternity he had never given her a single thought, never paid any attention to her, but treated her as though she were a cat or a dog. Yet every day she had lighted the stove, she had cooked and baked, gone to fetch water, chopped wood, slept with him on the same bed; and when he came home drunk from weddings, she had taken his fiddle respectfully, hung it on the wall and put him to bed--all this silently, with a timid, worried expression. And now he felt that he could take pity on her, that he would like to buy her a present, but it was too late...<sup>2</sup>

For a long time Yakov strains all his meagre intellectual powers and tries to focus his mind on the past events of his life. As he is passing the river, the willow tree and the little girl suddenly flash back into his memory, all the things he could have done, had he not "yawned away his life and done nothing."<sup>3</sup> Toward evening his end is near. In a last desperate effort to make up for a lifetime of inconsideration for his fellow-beings, Yakov, already dying, gives his most precious possession--his fiddle--to the person whom he has hated and abused more than anyone else, the Jew Moses.

Moses, a flutist in the band in which Yakov played until his death, abandons the flute and now plays only the fiddle. He regards it with the same respect as did Yakov's wife when she would hang it on the wall.

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<sup>1</sup>Chekhov, 1946, p. 340.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 342.





With his sad tunes which please all his listeners the effect of the coffin-maker's single good deed lives on.

### The Teacher of Literature (1894)

This story serves as yet another illustration of the failure of marriage to be a remedy for the isolation of individuals, or to provide lasting contentment to the partners.

The young Nikitin who has had an unhappy childhood as an orphan, who has had an equally lonely and depressing youth in which poverty was his constant companion, emerges from this with one chief desire: to make his life secure financially and materially, and to find lasting companionship. Compared with his efforts in this direction, his spiritual development and intellectual aspirations have been given a backseat. As yet he "has not read Lessing."<sup>1</sup> In due course, he obtains a solid position as a teacher, concludes a financially advantageous marriage with a good girl who proceeds to make him a cosy, comfortable nest and surround him with roast turkey, pots of sour cream, and preserves. In short, she is an excellent housekeeper and manages her little world in admirable fashion. Her greatest pleasure would be to see her husband grow smooth and plump. But here is where she fails to understand him.

Until now her husband has been the man who wanted only physical comforts and peace, and she has been able to please him completely by catering to his belly. However, with his material needs taken care of,

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<sup>1</sup>Chekhov, 1946, VIII, p. 363.





Nikitin is no longer satisfied with his situation. To his wife's astonishment he becomes transformed into a searcher for truth, an idealist. He is now aware that

. . . besides this soft lamplight which smiles on his conjugal happiness, besides this little world in which he and this cat here live so peacefully and so sweetly, there simply must be another world... And he had a passionate longing to be in that other world, to work in some factory or big workshop, to address audiences, to write, to publish, to raise a stir, to exhaust himself, to suffer... He wanted something that would engross him till he forgot himself, till he ceased to care for the personal happiness which offered only sensations so monotonous. . . .<sup>1</sup>

In the end he feels that he must leave his wife, the roast turkey, and the preserves or he will lose his sanity. He must find the other life--he must read Lessing. At this point Chekhov's story concludes. But as Marko asks: will Nikitin really leave his wife? Where will he go? Back into the loneliness from which he had earlier escaped?<sup>2</sup>

#### At a Country House (1894)

Chekhov here portrays a man's actions which due to his inner disintegration and resultant duality of mind lead to a breakdown of the channels of communication between himself and his friend. Despite entirely good intentions on his part, his speech seems to detach itself from him and, by sheer inertia, to take its own uncontrolled course, usually respecting little the feelings and opinions of others. Therefore, everybody seeks to avoid him and the isolation thus created affects his young daughters more seriously than himself.

Rashevich, a widower, lives with his two unmarried daughters on an out-of-the-way country estate. His acquaintances in the district are few because they all dislike him for the bigotry and intolerance which

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<sup>1</sup>Chekhov, 1946, VIII, pp. 369-370.

<sup>2</sup>Marko, WSJb, 1955, IV, p. 54.



he overbearingly exhibits in conversation. "They said that he had driven his wife into the grave with his talks and, behind his back, called him a malicious person and a toad."<sup>1</sup> As a result they have few visitors and especially the daughters suffer from boredom, loneliness, and the non-existence of eligible suitors.

But lately the young Meier, who serves as a Court Investigator in the district, has begun to pay frequent visits to the Rasheviches. The two girls know well that it is they who constitute the attraction for him and their father welcomes in him a possible husband for his elder daughter.

One evening Meier is again Rashevich's only guest. During the conversation before dinner the host once more expounds his prejudiced views in his usual domineering fashion. This time he gives vent to his hatred against the common people who, according to his belief, are zealously working their way up into increasingly more important positions in public life and are the cause of all evil: corruption, war, unrest, and the decline of the arts. His flow of words never ceases and Meier, who is listening only with impatience and reluctance, has no chance either to object or agree.

When the guest finally protests that it is time for him to go home, Rashevich bodily pushes him back into his chair and continues to besiege him with his ravings. His daughters too are annoyed. They

. . . looked with anguish and vexation at their egoistic father to whom obviously the pleasure to chatter on and to shine with his intellect was dearer and more important than the happiness

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<sup>1</sup>Chekhov, 1946, VIII, p. 374.



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of his daughters. Meier was the only young man who would come to their house . . . but this indefatigable old man dominated him and did not leave him for one step.<sup>1</sup>

As the host is carrying his attacks on the plebeians of this world to great length, Meier at last succeeds in interrupting him and rather firmly indicates his disapproval of the conversation by declaring that he himself is a commoner. A silence of embarrassment descends over the room and as the host is stammering some feeble excuses, Meier gets up and leaves. Rashevich can hardly understand what happened: he always has such good intentions. Why did he act so carelessly and tactlessly that such a regrettable misunderstanding could arise?

Yet the fact remains that the last suitor has been so deeply offended never to return to their house, and that the daughters are being flung into a loneliness which is gloomier than ever. At night Rashevich hears the girls sobbing in their bedroom:

. . . Zhenya complained that their father with his talks is driving all decent people from their house and today has taken away from them their only acquaintance, perhaps a suitor. . . . And Iraida spoke about their boring life and their ruined youth...<sup>2</sup>

#### Anna on the Neck (1895)

Reading this story, we are left to wonder--as so often happens with Chekhov--whether we are expected to laugh or cry. In Anna on the Neck, the writer's inclination towards "laughter through tears" is exemplified with particular clarity. In this kind of story it is almost

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<sup>1</sup>Chekhov, 1946, VIII, p. 378.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 379.





inevitable that the many humorous elements have a strong tendency to overshadow the more serious problem, which constitutes the real substance. Only when we look more closely do we see that the problem in Anna on the Neck is one of a marriage, which not only fails to alleviate the aloneness of the partners, but, for one of them at least, even increases it by causing the rupture of former family ties.

A poverty-stricken, widowed old schoolmaster who has developed a fondness for the bottle, and whom his two young sons, in most pathetic fashion, follow everywhere to keep him from misbehaving, is threatened with dismissal from his school. But in spite of these adversities, the old man lives with the sons and his pretty, grown-up daughter Anna in a closely-knit relationship which provides them with warmth and mutual comfort. Now Anna decides to marry an elderly, intolerably pompous official for his money. Even though she does not love him, she thinks that her sacrifice will help the financial position of her family and that the official can use his influence to prevent her father's dismissal.

During her early married life, Anna is very much afraid of her husband who treats her like a schoolgirl. Extremely unhappy and lonely, she finds consolation only by visiting her family. However, since her husband has reneged on his promise to help her family financially, the contrast between their poverty and her own relatively comfortable life becomes more and more embarrassing and causes her to drift away from them. Before very long, Anna begins to lose her shyness in the relations with her husband and asserts herself boldly in her new position. She has grown into a captivating beauty and enjoys great popularity in the



town's social circles. Rich admirers make their appearance on the scene, and soon the time has come for Anna to turn the tables on her husband who sees himself forced to give her entirely free hand in matters of money and love, while he himself fades away into a nonentity.

Anna's marriage has obviously failed. The diversion which she is now enjoying with her lovers cannot last long, and when they end, there will be no spiritually comforting marriage to turn to. Neither will there be a secure haven for her in the home of her family, for now in her new role as the belle of the town, she has taken to looking down on them and has irrevocably drawn away from them:

And Anna constantly rode in troikas, went hunting with Artymov [her lover], acted in one-act plays, went to dinners and more and more rarely visited her family. They now took their meals alone. Her father Peter Leontich began to drink more than before, there was no money, and the harmonium had long been sold to pay their debts. The boys now did not let him out into the street alone and always followed him to keep him from falling. Sometimes they happened to meet Anna on the old Kievan Street, out on one of her drives with a pair of horses, holding a trace-horse with her outstretched hand, and with Artymov in the driver's seat instead of the coachman. Then Peter Leontich would take off his tophat and would be about to shout something, but Petya and Andryusha would take hold of his elbows and say pleadingly:

"Don't, Papochka... Enough, Papochka!"<sup>1</sup>

### The Murder (1895)

When Chekhov, in 1890, returned from his journey to the prison colony of Sakhalin, he brought home with him a number of vivid impressions. What had struck him most, apart from the low standard of Public Health and the inhumanity of the prison conditions, was the loneliness which the

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<sup>1</sup>Chekhov, 1946, IX, p. 32.





prisoners and exiles had to endure. It is this sort of geographical isolation, in addition to the failure of two men to come to terms with each other in the realm of religion, which has served Chekhov as the subject for Murder.

In his search for God, Jacob has left the Orthodox Church and become a sectarian. Erecting an altar in his simple country home, he holds services there with his niece and sister. When his brother returns home after a long absence, he begins to harass Jacob with accusations of heresy and threatens to destroy the spiritual peace which his brother had gained only after a long inner struggle. In a fit of despair and blind rage Jacob kills his brother and is sentenced to twenty years of hard labour in Sakhalin.

After a few months on that island he tries to escape, but is caught and sentenced to a life term. During the long years which follow, Jacob succeeds somehow to gain for himself a new faith and a measure of peace. Only his immeasurable loneliness and the longing for his home-country cannot be silenced in any way:

There was no one with whom he could speak about his home. . . . Trembling from the autumn cold and the dampness of the sea, muffled up into his ragged sheepskin coat, Jacob intently, without moving, stared in the direction of his homeland.<sup>1</sup>

He strained his eyes into the darkness and it seemed to him that through a thousand versts of this obscurity he saw his country, his province, his district, Progonnaya [his village]. . . . His vision became blurred with tears, but he kept looking into the

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<sup>1</sup> Chekhov, 1946, IX, p. 59.





distance. . . . And his heart ached from longing for his home, and he wanted to live, to return home, to tell there about his new faith and save from damnation, if he could, even only one man, and live without suffering only for one single day.<sup>1</sup>

### An Artist's Story (1896)

While living on his country estate at Melikhovo, Chekhov had ample opportunity to observe the problems which the local peasants were facing. These problems served him either as the theme or background for a number of stories, such as The Wife, Peasants, and In the Ravine. The question of how to help the peasantry and how to improve their miserable living conditions is discussed also in An Artist's Story. But, as is often the case in Chekhov's fiction, here also, two equally interesting themes are artfully interwoven, making it difficult for the reader to decide which is the main one: over a divergence of views on the peasant problem two people become enemies, and, as a result, they and others are flung into loneliness.

A young artist begins to be a frequent guest of Lida Volchaninov, her young sister Zhenya, and their mother who live together on a country estate. Lida, almost fanatically, devotes her full energy to the improvement of the peasants' living conditions. She teaches school, organizes libraries and medical services, and is actively involved in local politics. A young woman of firm convictions, rather intolerant, Lida rules supreme in the household over her younger, delicate sister and their spineless mother.

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<sup>1</sup>Chekhov, 1946, IX, p. 60.



During one of the artist's visits, Lida gets involved in a heated debate with him, whom she despises as a useless member of society. Not landscapes are needed, she claims, but elementary schools and medical centres. The artist opposes her blind enthusiasm for her activities and declares that they are quite useless. The artist's arguments in the lengthy debate can be reduced to the opinion that the peasant is in a social prison and that it will not suffice to establish a library or medical services for him in that prison--as Lida is doing--but that he must be set free. Only then will he be able to develop his spiritual capacities. Lida's endeavours are not freeing the peasant from his sub-standard existence, but are only adding new links to his chains. As the discussion goes on, it becomes clear that their basic views of life are diametrically opposed and that there is no possible way in which they could come to an agreement. Although both refrain from violating the rules of courtesy, they part that evening as enemies.

The artist, meanwhile, has fallen in love with Lida's younger sister Zhenya, a sensitive and artistically inclined girl who basically agrees with his lofty views and returns his affection. They are kindred spirits, and a beautiful love seems to be in store for them. But when the artist returns next day for another visit, he finds only Lida. As it turns out, Zhenya and her mother have, on Lida's order, left for another, unknown part of Russia. Lida's blind hate for the artist had incited her to destroy cruelly the happiness of others. The artist never sees Zhenya again. Years later he finds himself contemplating:





"I am already beginning to forget about the house with the attic and only sometimes, when I am painting or reading, I suddenly, apropos of nothing, remember the green light in the window, the sound of my footsteps as I walked home through the fields at night, deeply in love and rubbing my hands from the cold. And still more rarely, in moments when I am sad, and loneliness weighs heavily on me, dim memories creep up, and little by little I somehow begin to feel that she too is thinking of me, waiting for me, and that we shall meet..."

Zhenya,<sup>1</sup> were are you?"<sup>2</sup>

### The Pecheneg (1897)

The Pecheneg saw Chekhov for the first time concern himself with the geographical isolation and loneliness of the people inhabiting Russia's vast steppe country. Other stories in which the writer avails himself of this background are At Home and The Schoolmistress, all written in the same year. It appears that the enforced solitude and the boredom of these people, although it cannot be held solely responsible for their fate, is nevertheless in Chekhov's opinion a contributing factor of no small consequence. As such, it tends to aggravate further the lack of communicability which Chekhov finds existing in ample measure even amongst those living in more densely populated areas. In The Pecheneg, a whole family is unhappy as a result of this particular situation, which is one of poverty and desolation. They are, as Chekhov points out in Enemies, "unhappy people [and as such] are selfish, evil, unjust, and less able than fools to understand each other."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The Russian text here reads "Misyus," which was a nickname for Zhenya.

<sup>2</sup>Chekhov, 1946, IX, p. 103.

<sup>3</sup>Chekhov, 1946, VI, p. 37.





Zhmukhin, a retired Cossack officer, lives with his wife and two sons on a small farmstead far off in the steppe. Their way of life is extraordinarily crude and primitive: they share their small hut with chickens and turkeys, and their two grown-up sons have never had any schooling. When a visitor, an attorney, arrives he finds them in their bare feet shooting chickens for target practice.

His timid little wife, aged before her years, Zhmukhin introduces thus:

"And this, allow me to introduce, . . . is the mother of these here bastards. Well, Lyubov Osipovna . . . shake your bones, mother, serve the guest. Let's have supper! And a bit lively!"<sup>1</sup>

As Zhmukhin tells his visitor, she considers herself the unhappiest woman in the world. She became his wife when she was only seventeen years old and, coming from a poor family, was glad to marry an officer who owned some land. And he relates further about her:

"From the first day of our marriage she began to weep and after that wept for twenty years--she is a crybaby, what can you do? And forever she sits and thinks and thinks. About what can a woman possibly think? I must confess that I don't consider women to be human beings."<sup>2</sup>

At dinner, it turns out that the guest is a vegetarian and the killing of animals is against his principles. Zhmukhin finds this very interesting and is prompted to develop at length his naive and narrow views on this point, while the visitor becomes increasingly more bored and annoyed, but feels compelled by his own politeness to listen and suffer without complaint. In describing the ex-officer, Chekhov notes with some irony that:

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<sup>1</sup>Chekhov, 1946, IX, p. 224.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 228-229.



He loved to philosophize when he was alone and it was quiet. Then he felt that he was very serious and profound and that only the important questions of this world occupied him. And now he wanted to dwell only on one significant thought, which unlike others, would provide guidance in this life, and he wanted to draw up some rules for himself, so that his life too would become just as serious and profound as himself. How well would he feel, as an old man, if he completely abstained from meat and various excesses. The time when people will no longer kill each other and also animals, will sooner or later come, it cannot be otherwise, and imagining this time, he saw himself clearly living peacefully with all the animals.<sup>1</sup>

Indefatigably, Zhmukhin continues to vex the attorney all evening and all night with similarly uninteresting thoughts. It seems that his outlook, as a result of his prolonged geographical isolation, has become so stunted and one-sided that there simply can be no common ground between him and a man of the world like his guest. But there is no end to the host's naive babble about the petty events which can only happen in the dullness of the steppe. Towards morning, not having had a wink of sleep, the visitor reaches the limits of his patience. He abruptly asks for the horses and leaves almost in a panic.

Although Zhmukhin craved company and intellectual intercourse, he has estranged and driven away yet another man with whom he could have communicated. He is an old man and will live out the rest of his days in loneliness. There will be no comfort for him from a wife who is spiritually broken and a nonentity, on whose tear-drenched face can be seen, as the guest is leaving, that "she envied him because of his freedom,--oh, with what pleasure she herself would have gone away from here!"<sup>2</sup> Or will he be able to derive any solace from his ruffian-sons whom he again sees shooting chickens for practice, when he himself

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<sup>1</sup> Chekhov, 1946, IX, p. 224.

<sup>2</sup> Chekhov, 1946, IX, p. 230.





dreams of a paradisiac state in which he will "live peacefully with all the animals . . . "?

### At Home (1897)

Even more clearly than in The Pecheneg, Chekhov reveals in this story the detrimental effects which the vastness and remoteness of the steppe country can have on intelligent and aspiring people, when they become exposed to it.

A description of the setting opens the narrative:

A small estate near

. . . a joyless station, emerging white in the loneliness of the steppe . . . without a shadow, without people. . . . pictures, immense, endless, fascinating through their monotony. Steppe, steppe, and nothing else. . . . spaciousness and freedom. . . .<sup>1</sup>

It is exactly this spaciousness and freedom, which the young, beautiful, and intelligent Vera has been longing to find when she arrives on the family estate, where she is welcomed as the new mistress by her not so young aunt and her old grandfather, her only remaining relatives.

However, it is not long before her joy for the simple country life, for the beauty of nature and the cosiness of her room fade and give way to boredom and disillusionment. Soon Vera finds out that the estate is not productive, that her grandfather is a glutton and leads a most inactive life, that her aunt is a prejudiced and domineering woman and mistreats the servants. Even before Vera arrives, her aunt has already made plans to marry her off to a doctor employed at a near factory.

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<sup>1</sup>Chekhov, 1946, IX, pp. 232-233.





He and other young people working there are the only ones with whom Vera can associate. However, all of them, including the doctor, are extremely dull and limited persons and no match for the well-educated, talented, and refined Vera. She complains that:

They read very little, played only marches and polkas, and the young folks always argued about things they did not understand and usually this ended with rudeness. They argued heatedly and loudly, but strangely, nowhere had Vera found people so indifferent and untroubled as here. It seemed as though for them there existed no motherland, no religion, no social interests.<sup>1</sup>

Vera is soon utterly bored with the incessant evening parties, card games, picnics, and also with the uninspired ways of her company, especially with that of the doctor.

And every time that Vera returned from a visit disgusted, she vowed to stay home in the future; but the day passed, evening came and again she hurried off to the factory, and thus almost the whole winter.<sup>2</sup>

With shame Vera feels the baseness and futility of her present life. Lying awake at night, she racks her brains:

What can one do? Where can one turn? An accursed, troublesome question, to which there are always many answers, yet, in reality not a single one.<sup>3</sup>

If one could serve the people in some way, improve their living conditions, heal their sicknesses, make sacrifices! But how is she to help, if she is a stranger to their ways, if she cannot stand the smell in their huts, the swearing, the sight of unwashed children, and the women-talk about their afflictions? "And become a doctor? For that, one must pass a Latin examination, and, besides, she has an unsurmountable aversion to corpses and diseases."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Chekhov, 1946, IX, p. 238.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid..

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 239.



But somehow there must be a way out of this intolerable situation. By now, Vera already hates her room and "looking out of the window, the naked trees, the grey snow, the ugly jackdaws, and the pigs which grandfather will eat..."<sup>1</sup> She intensely dislikes her aunt who forbids her to speak with a new workman because, as it turns out, he has been born out of wedlock, who asks Vera to go to church for no other reason but that the family's reputation be upheld. It is absolutely impossible to live with these people any longer. Already she is losing her refined manner and becoming as coarse and unfeeling as they are: in a fit of irritation and anger she chases an innocent servant girl from her room and orders her to be flogged. All this is the fault of the steppe Vera feels:

Here, in the steppe, whose end cannot be seen, nothing matters. . . . The infinite expanse, the long winters, the monotony and the boredom of one's life instill the feeling of impotence; the situation appears hopeless and there is nothing one wants to do--everything is futile.<sup>2</sup>

All of Vera's romantic illusions about the wholesomeness of country life have, as it were, burst like soap bubbles. When she takes stock of her situation and examines the possibilities of giving her empty life a purpose, she finds that many routes are blocked for her, and to take the others, which are open, she lacks the necessary strength and courage. There is only one easy way out of her present plight--to get married directly to the doctor. Easy indeed, since her aunt encourages her to take this step and the doctor is impatiently waiting for

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<sup>1</sup>Chekhov, 1946, IX, p. 240.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 241-242.





her. Besides, anything seems better than her present life. And suddenly the doctor, whom she had until now despised for his boorish and uninteresting ways, already looks so much better. "We will make out somehow,"<sup>1</sup> she thinks.

Spiritually broken, Vera chooses to leave the dreams of her youth behind and, without hoping for a better life, resigns herself to her fate.

A better life does not exist! Beautiful nature, one's dreams, and music are one thing, but the reality of life another. Clearly, happiness and truth are found only outside of this life... One must not simply live, but become one with this great steppe, which is as boundless and indifferent as eternity; become one with its colours, its burial mounds, and its vastness, and then everything will be alright...

Within a month Vera was already living at the factory.<sup>2</sup>

### The Schoolmistress (1897)

The figure of the ill-paid, little-respected, and often isolated schoolteacher is not an uncommon sight in Anton Chekhov's short stories. As the writer often used his pen to pass criticism on the social conditions of his time, so could the intolerable plight of many teachers not escape his attention. His great concern with their fate is expressed in a conversation which Maxim Gorky remembered:

Our teacher lives eight, nine months of the year like a hermit, and he becomes dull in his loneliness, without anybody to speak to, without books, without entertainment. And when he invites some of his colleagues to visit him, he will be accused as a political suspect. . . . All this is disgusting... What a mockery of a person, who does such great and important work. You know, when I see a schoolteacher, I become uncomfortable because of his timidity, because he is poorly clad, and I feel that for this

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<sup>1</sup>Chekhov, 1946, p. 242.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 243.





squalor I myself am somehow responsible... Seriously!<sup>1</sup>

It is this concern which Chekhov voices in The Schoolmistress. We are presented here with a very moving picture of a woman who unflinchingly fulfills her duty as a teacher, braving the isolation and primitive conditions of a life in the steppe and the total non-recognition of her efforts.

Maria Vasilevna is on her way home from the town where she went--as already so many times in her thirteen years as a country teacher--to lodge a complaint with the Zemstvo Board. Again her trip has been in vain, but she has not the strength to care. It seems to her as though she has been in this region already for an eternity and that along the road leading from the village to the town she knows every stone, every tree.

Here was her past, her present, and no other future could she imagine than the school, the road into town and back, and again the school, and again the road...<sup>2</sup>

On the way Maria's thoughts wander back into her past, which somehow seems to have passed away into nothingness. A long time ago there were parents, but they had died. There was a brother, an officer, but they had become estranged. All that remained of that distant part of her life was a photograph of her mother, completely faded now from the dampness in the school so that only her hair and her eyebrows could be made out.

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<sup>1</sup>Golubova, 1960, p. 494.

<sup>2</sup>Chekhov, 1946, IX, p. 244.

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If the past did not hold any promises for her, neither does the present. Her life as a village teacher is one great never-ending struggle. For more than two years already she has requested without success that the watchman at the school be dismissed because he does no work, only beats the pupils and is rude to her. The school-inspector is of little help to her, since he only comes once every three years and does not understand his work. The schoolboard meets only very rarely and nobody knows where, while the school trustee, a coarse and ignorant peasant, cannot be relied upon and does little more than protect his friend the watchman. There is positively nobody to whom she could turn for assistance.

Her working day begins at daybreak, when the pupils come storming into the school with snow, dirt, and noise. The schoolhouse itself is cold and damp. It is the teacher's task to collect money for firewood from the pupils, but after she has handed it over to the trustee, she usually has to beg him repeatedly to send the firewood; and to top it all, the people accuse her of keeping part of the money which she collects for herself. The end of each day announces itself with a headache, but there is no comfort for her in her cheerless quarters. At night, unfailingly, there will be those oppressive dreams about examinations, peasants, and snow-drifts.

And through this sort of life she had aged, become coarse, unsightly, angular, and awkward, as though she had been filled with lead. . . . And nobody finds her attractive, and life goes by tediously, without kindness, without the comforts of friendship, without interesting acquaintances. . . .

Her life is hard, uninteresting, and only a patient workhorse like Maria Vasilevna could stand it for long.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Chekhov, 1946, IX, p. 248.





"In her situation, what a delight it would be to fall in love!"<sup>1</sup>

And now, while Maria is lost in deep thought on her way home, another carriage suddenly draws up alongside hers. It is Khanov, one of the few interesting people in the district and, for Maria, the only eligible bachelor. She knows that he lives alone on his large estate and that he does very little except drink. Last year, he had conducted the examinations at the school. Although he already showed signs of aging, he had then made such a good impression on her that she had become thoroughly confused. But, as it is, he lives just as alone and isolated as she herself and to get more closely acquainted seems simply impossible.

They exchange a few obliging words from their respective carriages and as Maria looks at him she falls to thinking:

There was something, hardly noticeable, which gave him an appearance as though already poisoned, weak, and near death. And even now, in the forest, the smell of wine wafted over to her. Maria Vasilevna became terrified and began to pity this man who was perishing, unknown for what and why. It struck her that, if she were his wife or sister, then she would devote her whole life to saving him from death. Be his wife? Life is arranged in such a way that he lives alone on his large estate and she lives alone in her godforsaken village, but somehow even the thought that he and she could ever be close and on equal footing seems impossible and absurd. At bottom, the whole life and all human relations have become so incomprehensibly complicated that, when you think about it, you become frightened and your heart sinks.<sup>2</sup>

All her thoughts with regard to Khanov are futile, Maria Vasilevna knows, and yet, when their ways part and he drives off in a different direction, she cannot help but continue to dream about his "beautiful eyes, about love and that happiness which she will never have."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Chekhov, 1946, IX, p. 248.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 247.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.





The Man in a Case (1898)

In all the cases of isolation described in this paper so far, the condition has at least partly if not fully, been caused by factors external to the person suffering from it. Geographical isolation or isolation created by the forcible placing of persons into a strange environment are clearly due to causes beyond these persons' control. In those examples where the loss of common ground between people has produced isolation, both parties have, so far, been more or less responsible. In The Man in a Case, however, an entirely new form of isolation is depicted, one which is entirely self-imposed by the victim.

The not so heroic hero of this story subscribes to a policy of non-involvement in life. In order to avoid pain and suffering, he seeks to isolate himself from all people and from reality itself. Exchanging freedom for security, he crawls into a snug little case, safely cushioned with cotton wool. Lacking the courage to face life with its uncertainties, he turns himself into a living mummy. Subconsciously, he aspires to that kind of peace and security which, in its most perfect form, man finds only in death. Anticipating this state of death already in his lifetime, our man does attain peace and security, but has to take the other, inseparable, component part of death--isolation--into the bargain. Secure only in his self-made little case, he perishes as soon as he leaves it.

Belikov is a teacher of classical languages at a high school in a Russian provincial town. People never see him without his galoshes and umbrella, and even in the hottest weather he wears a heavy overcoat. Everything he owns must be kept in some sort of a case: his umbrella,



his watch, his pen-knife. And it seems that even his face is safeguarded by his always upturned coat-collar, dark glasses, and earplugs. His desire is to protect himself at all cost from outside influences which might destroy his inner peace. Since they could contain something unexpected with which he is neither willing nor prepared to cope, he is extremely afraid of all new proposals and developments. His beloved classical languages, by contrast, are safe ground for Belikov. He teaches them because they are a long-concluded matter and not subject to any unexpected or dangerous developments.

Not only is Belikov not in favour of innovations, but he constantly tries to prohibit existing customs and activities. His efforts in this regard are so impetuous that not only his colleagues, but even the headmaster live in fear of him. The whole school has been in his hands for the last fifteen years, and not only the school, but the town as well. The ladies are afraid to organize private theatricals and the clergy does not dare to play cards. For fear of him, the townspeople hesitate to talk in a loud voice, send letters, read books, make friends, or even help the poor.

It is only consistent with his general character that Belikov has never had the courage to face the risks of love or marriage. But to everyone's great surprise he is almost persuaded to become engaged to the sister of a colleague by the name of Kovalenko. As might be expected, however, he cannot quite muster the courage needed for a proposal. While still being undecided and weighing the pros and cons of marriage, he happens one day to see his prospective wife and her brother riding bicycles through the town. He has never seen such a shameful act in his life and





is terrified. The shock of this experience is so great that, next day, he feels unwell, leaves in the middle of a class, does not eat, and despite the hot weather dresses even more warmly than usual. Considering it his duty to protest at such horrible offence, he calls on the Kovalenkos. Finding only the brother at home, he points out to him that there is no regulation existing which permits teachers to ride bicycles. What an example for the students! And what if the director hears about it! Kovalenko, however, is not willing to tolerate this kind of preaching and intimidation and tells him to mind his own business. When Belikov then announces that he will have to report the substance of this conversation to the Headmaster so that people may not get a wrong impression of it, Kovalenko pushes him down the stairs. There he is just gathering himself and fumbling for his glasses, when his prospective fiancée enters the house with a friend and both burst out laughing. Now Belikov knows that everything will become public and he will be the laughingstock of the whole town.

This incident destroys any plans for an engagement which Belikov may have had. Only once and against better judgement had he dared to leave the safety of his case and bitterly he is punished for it! Violently upset, he worries himself into an illness and dies a month later.

And now, as he lay in his coffin, the expression on his face was gentle, pleasant, and even happy, as though he was glad that, finally, they had put him into that case which he would never again have to leave.

Yes, he had attained his ideal!<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Chekhov, 1946, IX, p. 263.





### About Love (1898)

About Love is the story of two people who remain isolated from each other because they have not the strength to overcome the confinements of existing conventions and thus let their love and happiness slip away. In its plot, this narrative is strongly reminiscent of Chekhov's own relationship with Lidiya Avilova who clearly recognized herself in the heroine.

Alekhin falls in love with Anna, the wife of a friend, in whose house he is a frequent guest. His love is returned by Anna who finds in him that intellectual and spiritual affinity which her good-hearted but dull husband does not afford her.

But there are many considerations which prevent them from confessing their mutual love. Alekhin is reluctant to deceive and hurt his good friend and destroy a relatively peaceful marriage which provides a home for Anna's children. Besides, he can offer her neither an easy nor an interesting life, and what would happen if he became ill, or died, or if they should later fall out of love? Anna, too, hesitates to break up her family, is afraid to cause pain to her mother who loves her husband like her own son. Also, she no longer feels young enough to start a new life.

Thus, the years go by, and Alekhin and Anna, without confessing their love, merely let it "lie on their souls like a light shadow."<sup>1</sup> Only when Anna's husband is transferred to another town and Alekhin is taking his leave from her forever, do both open their hearts to each other:

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<sup>1</sup>Chekhov, 1946, IX, p. 280.



I confessed my love to her, and with a hot pain in my heart I understood how unnecessary, trivial, and false all that was which kept us from loving each other. I understood that in matters of love one must base one's considerations on something higher and more important than mere happiness or unhappiness, sin or virtue in their common meaning, or that one should not think at all.

I kissed her for the last time, pressed her hand and we parted-- forever. The train was already moving. I went into the next compartment, it was empty, sat down and cried there until the train reached the first stop. Afterwards I walked on foot to Sofino...<sup>1</sup>

### Ionych (1898)

Again, as in About Love, Chekhov has chosen to depict the failure of two people, man and woman, to coordinate their lives and establish lasting communication. Even if the reasons for this failure here are of a different nature, the final result--isolation and non-fulfillment--remains the same.

Ionych is a striving young doctor in a provincial town, idealistic, and mature beyond his years. He has fallen in love with Katya who is in almost all respects his inferior, and undeserving of him. While Ionych is courting her, she plays with his feelings and dignity in the most shameless manner and, in the end, rejects his proposal. This wounds him so deeply that he loses his emotional equilibrium and is fundamentally changed in his character. Thrown off his course by this bitter disappointment, he begins to deteriorate morally. As a substitute for erstwhile ideals, he now hoards money and devotes his life to securing his material position. Growing stout, lazy, and stagnant, he becomes a human vegetable--the materialist incarnate.

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<sup>1</sup>Chekhov, 1946, IX, p. 284.





Meanwhile Kathy experiences rather a reverse development. Immature and vain, she had envisioned herself as a great and celebrated artist and thought that she owed it to her art to abstain from trivial love. Leaving the town to pursue her studies, she returns a few years later, a changed woman. The failure of her plans and the recognition that she is not a genius have had a sobering, favourably disillusioning effect on her. She has grown into a sincere and worthy woman.

When Ionych and Kathy meet again, she is now the superior person and regrets her former rejection of him. Kathy expects to see the old Ionych and would be glad now to receive a renewed proposal from him, but she finds only a distorted reflection of his former self, too preoccupied with the accumulation of his wealth to care for her or love. The difference of outlook and maturity between them again precludes communication and an intimate relationship. They still live in the same town, but the chasm of isolation which has opened up between them can never be bridged.

### The New Villa (1899)

To a degree, any class system has a certain tendency to isolate individuals by covertly restricting their intercourse to that with members of their own social group. Not infrequently, however, people so affected escape these social confinements and seek contact with another stratum of society. But such obstacles as envy, mistrust, difference in education, and the inability to understand each other's ways often cannot be overcome, rendering these attempts unsuccessful. Such a case is pointedly illustrated in The New Villa.





"Don't buy property, buy your neighbours"<sup>1</sup> is a maxim which Elena Ivanovna is determined to follow when she moves with her engineer-husband and her children into a newly-built country house near the village Obruchanovo. She knows that the local peasants can look upon her and her family only with distrust and, therefore, spares no effort to befriend them and live in peace with them. Since, unlike her husband, she is herself of lowly birth and has an ample measure of sickness and problems in her own family, she can well understand the plight of the poverty-ridden villagers, and thus her compassion is perfectly sincere.

Yet all her efforts are wasted like seeds being sown into infertile soil. When Elena offers her help to a group of peasants to build a school in the village, one of them immediately relates a similar case in the district where a landowner had started to build a school, and the people had to finish it under hardship and sacrifice. Insisting that they do not want a school and that their children can go to the neighbouring village, they cause the lady to go home discouraged and offended.

In the meantime, a small incident in which three of the engineer's horses and a calf have accidentally strayed onto the villagers' pasture and grazed there, is greatly blown up by the peasants, who impound the animals and demand a sum of money for damages. It seems indeed that the eternal squalor and poverty of their lives has destroyed the peasants' sense of fairness and corrupted their morals. Not only do they refuse the good will and kindness extended to them by the engineer and his wife, but drive them to despair with countless minor, almost prank-like injuries:

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<sup>1</sup>Chekhov, 1946, IX, p. 336.



they let their cattle and pigs run in the engineer's garden, saplings are cut down in his copse, the road is dug up near his property, and he has to go two miles around, the village children have gathered all the mushrooms from his park, and wheels are stolen from his carriage.

Only Rodion, the village blacksmith, stands out from the rest of the villagers as a kindhearted, honest, though simple-minded man. With sadness he sees the peasants wronging the engineer, but he has not the power to influence them. All he can do is to defend them before Elena by pointing out their basic goodness and ask her to have patience with them:

"Have patience for a couple of years . . . it will all turn out alright. Our folks are good and peacable. . . . Don't mind Kozov and the Lychkovs, and don't mind Volodka. . . . The others are quiet folks, they are silent. Some would be glad to say a word from the heart and to stand up for themselves, but cannot. They have a heart and a conscience, but no tongue. Don't be offended... have patience... What does it matter?"<sup>1</sup>

The villagers, however, continue to molest the engineer and his wife whose patience is wearing thin. One day, while the engineer is sitting on the verandah of his house with his family, two peasants, father and son, arrive requesting the settlement of a dispute. When the engineer politely tells them that they will have to take their business to a police officer, the two proceed to brandish big sticks and settle their affair right at the bottom of the verandah steps, terrifying Elena and the children. Next day they leave for Moscow and soon the house is sold.

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<sup>1</sup>Chekhov, 1946, IX, p. 337.





Now the property is owned by a cold-hearted official, who does not respond when the villagers bow. And to them, all, which has been, seems like a dream:

They trudged along, tired out, and mused...

In their village, they thought, people were good, quiet, and sensible, fearing God. And Elena Ivanovna, too, was quiet, kind and gentle; it made one sad to look at her, but why had they not got on together, why had they parted like enemies? What kind of a mist was it, that had shrouded from their eyes what was most important, and had let them see only the damage done by the cattle . . . and all those trivial things which now, remembering them, seemed so nonsensical? How was it that they lived in peace with the new owner, yet could not get along with the engineer?<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Chekhov, 1946, IX, p. 341.





## CONCLUDING REMARKS

It appears that most critics and biographers concerned with Chekhov in the past have somehow neglected to see him as a man who was misunderstood by his contemporaries and isolated from them during most of his life. In any case, this aspect of Chekhov's existence has not been afforded the attention which it deserves. Therefore, in Chapter I of this thesis an attempt has been made to compensate for this neglect and to move the writer's life into new perspective.

Chekhov's isolation was caused partly by physical circumstances such as his solitary existence when he was a young high school student in Taganrog, or later, as a sick man, his confinement in Yalta. Perhaps as more important, however, must be regarded the other part of his isolation which was spiritual. It was evidenced in the relationship with his parents from whom he was separated through his superior intellect and education; also in the scanty communication with his friends who often failed to comprehend his particular attitude towards art and life, and likewise in matters of love in which his not always explicable reticence was an isolating factor.

Chapter I may be considered as a biographical study independent of the remainder of the thesis. It is left entirely to the discretion of the reader to leave it as such, or to link it with the second chapter in which Chekhov's literary predisposition for the problem of human isolation is established. Although it strongly suggest itself that the writer's extensive portrayal of the problem was triggered by the experience of loneliness and misunderstanding in his personal life, this



cannot be conclusively proven. However, a knowledge of Chekhov's biography is not necessary to extract the elements of human isolation from his short stories. Occasionally, throughout the thesis, certain characters and events which seem to be autobiographical have been pointed out. But since allowance must be made that they may be coincidental, they have not been used to prove or support any claim.

The second chapter of this thesis has been devoted to a study of twenty-five of Chekhov's stories which most typically portray various cases of human isolation. So far, past criticism has let this facet of his fiction pass almost wholly unrecognized. This is understandable, since the theme of isolation frequently occurs side by side with other, more ostentatious, themes and is thus camouflaged and de-emphasized by Chekhov. In Chapter II, therefore, these rather concealed elements have been drawn out into the open and moved into sharper focus, thereby not only confirming their existence but also making them more readily accessible to the interested reader.





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The following bibliography is comprised of two parts. All works consulted for this thesis, and others found to be of appreciable relevance to its topic are included in Section I. Footnote references made to any text in this section contain, as a rule, only the author's name, the year of publication, and the page number, but are adequate to enable the reader to locate the respective work easily in the bibliography.

One of the reasons for selecting this particular topic for the thesis at hand was the author's belief that it had been treated inadequately in the past. Since this assumption required verification, a considerable number of critical works and biographies on Chekhov were examined. The majority of them was found to be of no relevance to the topic. These are listed in the bibliography under Section II.

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## Introduction

The following is a summary of the findings of the study conducted by the research team. The study was designed to investigate the impact of the proposed intervention on the target population. The results of the study are presented in the following sections. The first section provides a brief overview of the study design and methodology. The second section presents the results of the study, including the main findings and conclusions. The third section discusses the implications of the findings for practice and policy. The fourth section provides a summary of the study and its limitations. The fifth section provides a brief conclusion.

## Methodology

The study was conducted using a quasi-experimental design. The study population consisted of 100 participants who were recruited from a local community center. The participants were divided into two groups: an intervention group and a control group. The intervention group received the proposed intervention, while the control group received a standard intervention. The study was conducted over a period of 12 weeks. Data were collected at baseline, at 6 weeks, and at 12 weeks. The data were analyzed using statistical methods. The results of the study are presented in the following sections. The first section provides a brief overview of the study design and methodology. The second section presents the results of the study, including the main findings and conclusions. The third section discusses the implications of the findings for practice and policy. The fourth section provides a summary of the study and its limitations. The fifth section provides a brief conclusion.



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